

73. Artemisia Gentileschi

Letters to Her Patron Don Antonio Ruffo

The judgment that men's work was more skilled than women's affected the visual arts as well as other types of production in the early modern period. Certain branches of art—in particular, painting, sculpture, and architecture—were judged “major” arts, while others—such as needlework, goldsmithing, porcelain manufacture, and textiles—were judged “minor” or “decorative” arts, or even “crafts.” True art increasingly came to be seen as the product of individual genius, not hard work, and linked with characteristics judged to be masculine, such as power, forcefulness, and singularity of purpose. A hierarchy also developed within painting itself during the early modern period, with large history paintings viewed as the most important, followed by portraits, landscapes, miniatures, still lifes, and finally flower paintings. This hierarchy was clearly gendered, as women were not allowed to study the male nude, essential if one wanted to paint history paintings, and over half the known flower painters were women. A few women, however, did not accept the view that only men could paint professionally; they received training privately—often from their fathers—and sought out patrons just like their male counterparts. The following are letters to a patron from one of the most prolific early modern women painters, Artemisia Gentileschi (c. 1597–1651), who used her skills at painting women to produce many mythological and biblical scenes, including numerous depictions of the Old Testament heroine Judith, who cut off the head of the tyrant Holofernes during his war with the Israelites.

A. Letter to Don Antonio Ruffo Naples, January 30, 1649

Most Illustrious Sir and My Master,

By God's will, Your Most Illustrious Lordship has received the painting and I think that by now you must have seen it. I fear that before you saw the painting you must have thought that I was arrogant and presumptuous. But I hope to God that after seeing it you will agree that I was not totally wrong. In fact, were it not for Your Most Illustrious Lordship, of whom I am so affectionate a servant, I would not have given it for one hundred and sixty, because in every other place where I have been, I was paid one hundred scudi per figure. And this was in Florence as well as in Venice, and in Rome and even in Naples when there was more money. Whether this is due to merit or luck, Your Most Illustrious Lordship, a discriminating nobleman with all of the virtues of the world, will judge what I am.

I sympathize greatly with Your Lordship, because a woman's name causes doubt until

her work is seen. Please forgive me, for God's sake, if I gave you reason to think me greedy. As for the rest I will not trouble you any longer. I will only say that on other occasions I will serve you with greater perfection, and if Your Lordship likes my work, I will send you also my portrait so that you can keep it in your gallery as all the other Princes do.

And thus I end this letter and I most humbly bow to Your Most Illustrious Lordship with the assurance that as long as I live I will be ready for any orders from you. To end, I kiss your hands.

Your Most Illustrious Lordship's most humble servant Artemisia Gentileschi

B. Letter to Don Antonio Ruffo Naples, November 13, 1649

My Most Illustrious Sir,

I prefer not to discuss our business in this letter in case that gentleman [the bearer]

will read it. With regard to your request that I reduce the price of the paintings, I will tell Your Most Illustrious Lordship that I can take a little from the amount that I asked, but the price must not be less than four hundred ducats, and you must send me a deposit as all other gentlemen do. However, I can tell you for certain that the higher the price, the harder I will strive to make a painting that will please Your Most Illustrious Lordship and that will conform to my taste and yours. With regard to the painting which I have already finished for Your Most Illustrious Lordship, I cannot give it to you for less than I asked, as I have already overextended myself to give the lowest price. I swear, as your servant, that I would not have given it even to my father for the price that I gave you. Don Antonio, my Lord, I beg you, for God's sake, not to reduce the price because I am sure that when you see it, you will say that I was not presumptuous. Your nephew, the Duke, thinks that I must have great affection for you to charge you such a price. I only wish to remind you that there are eight [figures], two dogs and landscape and water. Your Most Illustrious Lordship will understand that the expense for models is staggering.

I am going to say no more except what I have in my mind, that I think Your Most Illustrious Lordship will not suffer any loss with me and that you will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman.

And thus I most humbly bow to you.

Your Most Illustrious Lordship's most humble servant Artemisia Gentileschi.

C. Letter to Don Antonio Ruffo
Naples, November 13, 1649

My Most Illustrious Sir,

I received a letter of 26th October which I greatly appreciated, particularly noting how my Master always concerns himself with favoring me despite my unworthiness. In it, you tell me about that gentleman who wishes to have some paintings by me, that he would like a Galatea and a Judgment of Paris, and that Galatea should be different from the one that Your Most Illustrious Lordship owns. There

was no need for you to suggest this to me, since, by the grace of God and of the Most Holy Virgin, it would occur to a woman with my kind of talent to vary the subjects in my paintings; never has anyone found in my pictures any repetition of invention, not even of one hand.

As for the fact that this gentleman wishes to know the price before the work is done, believe me, as I am your servant, that I do it most unwillingly, since it is very important to me not to err and thus burden my conscience, which I value more than all the gold in the world. I know that by erring I will offend my Lord God and I thus fear that God will not bestow his grace on me. Therefore, I never quote a price for my works until they are done. However, since Your Most Illustrious Lordship would like me to do it, I will do what you command. Tell this gentleman that I want five hundred ducats for both; he can show them to the whole world and, should he find anyone who does not think that the paintings are worth two hundred scudi more, I do not want him to pay me the agreed price. I assure Your Most Illustrious Lordship that these are paintings with nude figures requiring very expensive female models, which is a big headache. When I find good ones they fleece me and at other times, one must suffer their trivialities with the patience of Job.

As for my doing a drawing and sending it, I have made a solemn vow never to send my drawings because people swindled me. In particular I just today found out that; in order to spend less, the Bishop of St. Gata, for whom I did a drawing of souls in Purgatory, commissioned another painter to do the painting using my work. If I were a man I cannot imagine it would turn out this way, because when the concept [*inventione*] has been realized and defined with lights and darks, and established by means of planes, the rest is a trifle. I think that this gentleman is wrong to ask for drawings since he can see the design and the composition of the Galatea.

I don't know what else to say except that I kiss Your Most Illustrious Lordship's hands and most humbly bow to you, praying for the greatest happiness from Heaven.

LIVES *and* VOICES

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