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Analyzing Mary Garrard's "The Allegory of Painting"

In this paper, I will analyze Mary Garrard's work in chapter six of her book, "Artemisia Gentileschi", titled "The Allegory of Painting." I will assess her thesis that Artemisia Gentileschi's work, *Self-Portrait as an Allegory of Painting* (fig. 1) is as important a work as Garrard says- that the work is a bold statement made by Gentileschi in a time where men were the dominant force in the arts. As such, I will analyze her scholarship, the evidence she presents, and her method of analyzing works iconographically to support her evidence.

Garrard begins with some brief points about the work and Gentileschi's inspiration, stating that *Self-Portrait as an Allegory of Painting* (fig. 1) is one of Gentileschi's major accomplishments as an artist. The work goes against the tradition of the time, and is a commentary on later Renaissance art theory dealing with the personification of the arts. She says the work is a self-portrait, only accomplishable because both La Pittura (the personification of painting) and Gentileschi are female. Throughout her oeuvre, Gentileschi used heroines Susanna, Lucretia, and Judith to express facets of her female experience, particularly her rape by Tassi. Although these works are direct likenesses, each heroine represents a different aspect of Gentileschi's sexual history: Susanna, her sexual vulnerability (Garrard 208); Lucretia, the issues of self-doubt, blame, and questioning she faced at her trial (Garrard 232); and Judith, a strong female enacting revenge, echoing her feelings towards Tassi and the rape itself (Garrard 312). In *Self-Portrait as an Allegory of Painting* (fig.1), Gentileschi depicts herself as herself while alluding to La Pittura. Garrard briefly analyzes the work iconographically for proof that

Gentileschi has painted herself in the image of La Pittura: Gentileschi is painting, lost in her work, with unruly hair, wearing prismatic clothing and a golden chain with a pendant mask of imitation (Garrard 337). She suggests that Gentileschi's inspiration for the piece may have come from a medal dating 1611 commemorating Bolognese painter Lavinia Fontana (Garrard 339). This medal is akin to a coin, with Fontana in profile on one side, and La Pittura at work at an easel on the opposite side. As these two images are on a coin, they thus "overlap" identities. This implies that the painter is also La Pittura, since the two are female, and Garrard says Gentileschi takes this idea further by fusing the allegory with the artist (herself) into one being. However, I would argue that her point about the overlapping identities on the coin is a weak point—just because two images are on opposing sides, this does not imply the two are one. They may be related by sex but are not treated as one and the same. I argue that they are separate figures with only the shared characteristic of female sex, and that this is why Artemisia bringing the two together as one figure in *Self-Portrait as an Allegory of Painting* (fig. 1) is so important (Garrard 339).

Garrard then examines La Pittura's journey to acceptance—her origins, relation to other personifications, how these personifications changed over time, and painter's arguments for needing a personification. Throughout this section, I believe the evidence and works she presents as evidence are all strong, as this is merely a brief history of the figures based upon scholarship and not her opinion. To present her evidence, Garrard looks at works depicting La Pittura, dating from 1210-1626, charting her journey from Giorgio Vasari's home to becoming a propagandistic figure in her own right. She begins with the work *La Pittura* (fig. 2), painted in 1542 by Giorgio Vasari in the Stanza della Fama of his Arezzo home. This work, Garrard says, set

the standard for the representation of the figure—a winged figure sitting at an easel, practicing her painting (Garrard 340). From here, she analyzes the beginnings of personifications of art, starting in the Middle Ages. In this time, there were seven established canonic arts in two divisions: the Trivium, composed of Dialectic, Rhetoric, and Grammar, and the Quadrivium, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astrology (Garrard 341). This number later increased to ten with Poesia, who represented poetry, Philosophy, and Theology. These figures were typically depicted as female figures, and Garrard reasons that their female sex separates them from these male-focused fields, allowing the females to represent the abstract thought required to perform these tasks. La Pittura's fight to be included among these figures is documented by Garrard. She notes that artists such as Leonardo da Vinci argued that painting required inspiration, involving a higher order of thought and creation, and therefore, it too deserved a figure (Garrard 342). However, there is a struggle for the figure to be accepted, and Garrard explores the social issues surrounding the figure. Allowing a personification of painting would give painters an elevated social status, permitting them to be separated from those who practice manual labor. To explain further, she utilizes alternate viewpoints from other established art historians. Charles de Tolnay suggests, "the theoretical separation between fine and mechanical arts . . . was intimately bound up with the social separation between artist and artisan" (Garrard 343). This statement suggests that artists desired their own personifications to be considered separate from those who practiced manual labor. She offers another perspective from Nikolaus Pevsner, who writes that artists came together to form the Florentine Academy in 1563 to both free them from association with guilds and to raise their

own social status. Garrard provides this outside information to state that art was used propagandistically to elevate arts and artists, giving glory to them instead of God (Garrard 343).

At the time these artists were beginning to use their art propagandistically to promote for higher social status and were forming the academy, Vasari painted his Sala della Fama in his Florentine home. Garrard presents this and other frescoes as prominent vehicles in the campaign by artists to elevate the arts, suggesting that these frescoes' inclusion of Athena and Apollo (the protectors of the arts) linked the glorification of art with the social position of the artist. Female personifications cemented La Pittura's popularity as a female personification of art, and artists began depicting her alongside Poesia. The two were shown together because painting and poetry were considered sister arts—poetry is spoken painting, and painting is mute poetry. La Pittura was now depicted with a bound mouth and pendant of imitation. This sisterhood established La Pittura, finally, as a personification. Garrard strongly analyzes this relationship through two works—*Pittura and Poesia* (fig. 3), a painting by Francesco Furini, and *Allegory of Painting* (fig. 4), by Marco Boschini (Garrard 346).

To evaluate why Gentileschi's sex makes her work so unusual and thus important, Garrard analyzes male portraiture from an iconographical and social viewpoint to illustrate how male painters attempted to link themselves to La Pittura. Male portraiture emphasized their status, with artists depicting themselves wearing expensive clothing in the studio, as seen in Antonio Moro's *Self-Portrait*, dated 1558, and in J.C. Droochsloot's work *Self-Portrait in the Studio* (fig. 5) (Garrard 347). Alternately, artists would depict themselves wearing gold medals awarded to them by rulers, which Garrard argues was an ineffective portrayal of the artist as an artist, since other noblemen were also offered these medals (Garrard 349). If artists included a

studio setting, this allowed the stigma of manual labor to be evoked. Male artists, then, had to attempt to associate themselves with La Pittura, but, being male, they couldn't represent themselves as her. Here, Garrard analyzes three works: Anthony Van Dyck's *Self Portrait* (fig. 6), 1633-35, G.D. Cerrini's *Allegory of Painting with Self-Portrait of the Artist*, mid-seventeenth century, and Nicolas Poussin's *Self-Portrait* (fig. 7), 1650. Van Dyck's self-portrait shows him holding his gold medal naïvely, while pointing to a sunflower, of which both symbolize painting and show the artist's devotion to those he serves—his king, God, and painting (Garrard 351). Cerrini's work shows La Pittura holding a portrait of the artist and a palette, perhaps suggesting that she painted Cerrini. Finally, Poussin's work is the reverse, with La Pittura depicted in a painting in the back of the room and Poussin placed in the center (Garrard 353). In these works Garrard says, both the male artist and La Pittura are separate, and this illustrates how Gentileschi's self-portrait was so radical—no male artist could combine himself with La Pittura in such a way.

Finally, Garrard begins to analyze the main work, Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as an Allegory of Painting* (fig. 1). Garrard states "painter, model, and concept are one and the same" (Garrard 354). Gentileschi, lost in the act of painting with her unruly hair, doesn't allude to the gold medal around her neck; Garrard states it is there "by natural right." Her unruly hair contrasts with her male counterparts' well-groomed, proper look (Garrard 354). Garrard suggests that Gentileschi drew inspiration from Ripa's *Iconologica* (1593), a text about personifications published in the year Gentileschi was born. She goes on to suggest that Gentileschi referenced this book specifically for this work, and she analyzes the work iconologically for evidence. This can be seen in Gentileschi's depiction of *drappo cangiante*,

prismatic drapery, to prove her worth as an artist in her ability to handle color. Violets and greens can be found in her sleeves; however, Gentileschi extends this to the rest of the painting, using color relationships. The same red-brown can be seen in background, bodice, and skirt, balancing it with green and blue-violet throughout her blouse and sleeves. The color scheme of the painting is established on her palette in five colors (Garrard 355). Garrard takes a feminist viewpoint when speaking of Gentileschi not showing her full body and dress—women were depicted with long dresses, to represent their beauty, but also with bound mouths, as women were seen as having little intellect. Gentileschi omits her dress and bound mouth and instead opts for an active pose that prevents the viewer from focusing on Gentileschi's beauty. Removing the bound mouth, which associated La Pittura with her sister, Poesia (mute poetry), does remove a characteristic of La Pittura, but Garrard suggests that this represents Gentileschi's intellect and her desire to be perceived as intellectual and worthy of speaking as a female (Garrard 356).

Mary Garrard's analysis of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as an Allegory of Painting* (fig. 1) is, overall, strong. She discusses the symbolism by referring to other historical representations. Garrard looks to various texts and works of art to draw comparisons and analyze Gentileschi's work iconologically, examining elements from the pendant to Artemisia's hair, and she does this well. She considers the social standing of artists and the general exclusion of women from art. The evidence she presents is convincing, and I had trouble finding anyone who argued against her work. Garrard demonstrates that we need knowledge of the history of La Pittura, of male portraiture, and of additional works to truly comprehend Gentileschi's profound work. She makes a strong case for Gentileschi's work being feminist in

nature—work that boldly challenges the conventions of her time. Truly, Gentileschi has effectively allegorized herself, modest as she is, to solve the problem of professional portraiture with which male artists of her time had struggled.



La Pittura (Self-portrait)

Artemisia Gentileschi

Oil on canvas, 1630

Fig. 1



Allegory of Painting

Giorgio Vasari II

Fresco

Arezzo, Italy, 1542

Fig. 2



Pittura and Poesia

Francesco Furini

Oil Painting

Florence, 1626

Fig. 3



Frontispiece, Allegory of Painting

Marco Boschini

Engraving

1674

Fig. 4



Self-Portrait in the Studio

J.C. Droochsloot

Oil Painting

Macon, 1630

Fig. 5



Self-Portrait with Sunflower

Anthony van Dyck

Oil Painting

1633-35

Fig. 6



Self-Portrait

Nicolas Poussin

Oil Painting

Louvre, 1650

Fig. 7

Works Cited

1. Garrard, Mary D. "The Allegory of Painting." *Artemisia Gentileschi*. Princeton, 1989. 337-370. Print.
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