

Artemisia Gentileschi: Illuminating Women Artists

Sheila Barker

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Art historian Sheila Barker's biography of Artemisia Gentileschi presents the facts of Artemisia's life, framing a narrative around why and how its events happened as they did. In a "visual contextualization of the lives and works" of its subject, this volume traces the crosscurrents of Artemisia's life and art in the work that she produced.

"More has been written about Artemisia Gentileschi ... than any other early modern woman artist," and collective fascination remains. Her story is rich in paradoxes. Her abundant self portraits foster a sense of familiarity, but gaps in her historical record synchronize with some of her most dramatic life events. She was one of the most esteemed artists of her time, and new sources relevant to Artemisia continue to show up in archives throughout the Western world. Still, Artemisia and many other prominent women artists of her period are overlooked or footnoted in art history.

Barker's abundant volume abandons notions of completeness in favor of asking how Artemisia "stood with respect to her society's views of womanhood" and integrating the answers into an artistic timeline that accounts for the "vicissitudes of her progress as an artist." While slim, the book draws on new discoveries to overturn long-held ideas about Artemisia while introducing a more complex understanding of her as an artist, woman, and entrepreneur. Using period art, it illuminates her early adoption and adaptation of Caravaggio's avant garde naturalism, her deployment of the female erotic nude, and her self-creation as a brand that she leveraged in both art and life.

Barker's Artemisia, in effect, seizes "upon early modern feminism—with its emphasis on women's boundless potentiality" and uses it to construct herself and paint a world wherein women—whether they were monarchs, victims, or heroines—are subjects worthy of contemplation in their own rights.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (March / April 2022)

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