

Review of journal article by Mary D. Garrard: “Artemisia
Gentileschi’s *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*”

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Review

With her *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (Fig. 1), artist Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652) attempted a new type of painting by depicting herself as an artist who was intellectually and socially aware, and she did so by presenting herself in the actual act of painting, representing the allegory of painting. Mary D. Garrard's essay is concerned with a feminist ideology of power and social position. The importance of the painting might have been recognized earlier if it had been painted by a man (Garrard 97) because women at the time of Gentileschi weren't likely to be recognized for brilliant artistic talent. But her painting could only have the power it does have due to its being painted by a woman, because only a woman could truly identify herself with the personification, and also because male painters had always separated the two themes of allegory and subject. The significance of the painting is that Artemisia Gentileschi combined two themes in one representative painting. Garrard argues that Gentileschi was both the subject-artist *and* the allegory of painting.

Before the time of Gentileschi's painting, the various art forms had historically been



Fig. 1: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*.

presented as female personifications. The original seven Liberal Arts of dialectic, rhetoric, grammar, arithmetic, geometry, music and astrology were established in the fifth century and were usually shown as female figures when allegorically represented. Along with the seven original Liberal Arts, painting and sculpture were occasionally included allegorically, in artistic or architectural mediums, but they were usually depicted in masculine form, indicating they were mechanical arts or crafts, and thereby more suited for male representation. The male figures in those instances actually represented the artisans rather than the personification of the art. Painting wasn't yet considered worthy of the most respected manner of personification—that of feminine representation.

Giorgio Vasari, in 1542, was the first known artist to depict the art of painting with a female allegorical representation, Pittura. Accompanying Pittura in his woodcut illustrations, were other female allegorical representations—Sculptura (for sculpture), Architettura (for architecture), and Poesia (for poetry). Later, in the fifteenth century, poetry, philosophy, and theology were added to the Liberal Arts to make a total of ten. Painting was still excluded as a Liberal Art, and painters were still considered artisans, mere practitioners of their craft.

Painting and sculpture were eventually accepted into the Liberal Arts in the early sixteenth century, largely due to their value being able to be raised from their perception as manual crafts to intellectual endeavors by Leonardo da Vinci and Michaelangelo. For painting to be worthy as a Liberal Art it had to first be seen as more than its finished product; the intelligence behind the execution had to be evident. Only when the finished product came from a thoughtful intellectual endeavor could it thereby warrant a corresponding female allegorical representation.

Female personifications were more likely to symbolize grace, beauty and intellectual

pursuits than male personifications, which were usually symbolized as men laboring at their respective trade. Men were still associated with manual labor and it was easier for a female figure to represent the antithesis of hard physical work and manual labor.

The artist wanted to be distinctly separated from the artisan. Painters wanted to elevate their art form from that of, for example, a potter. Many elevated themselves by actually depicting their own image in the painting itself, and it was often done with them wearing a gold chain, suggesting recognition from a king.

Athena Introducing Pittura to the Liberal Arts, by Hans von Aachen, was completed around 1600, and as its title describes, it depicted “painting” being welcomed as a Liberal Arts. This painting included two important elements. It glorified art as an intellectual endeavor, and it enhanced the position of the artist by using Pittura, the female personification used by Vasari over half a century earlier.

Prior to Gentileschi’s *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, paintings tended to either exclude the artist when they were exalting painting itself, or they excluded reference to painting in an allegorical form when the artist was depicted in it. An example of the first is a painting by Van Dyck, *Self portrait with a Sunflower* (Fig. 2). He had been given a gold chain by King Charles I in 1633. Van Dyck is shown pointing at the flower to indicate painting as a beautiful art form, and he is also pointing with the other hand to the gold chain to exalt himself and show that he (the artist) was worthy of royal recognition.



Fig 2: Anthony Van Dyck, *Self portrait with a Sunflower*.

Painter G. D. Cerrini did a slightly better job of combining the painter with the allegory of painting in his work, *Allegory of Painting with Self-Portrait of the Artist* (Fig. 3). He presented a female who represented the allegory of painting, and that female was next to a portrait of the artist himself within the painting.

Neither Van Dyck nor Cerrini were able to combine the allegory of painting with the artist. Joining the two components seemed elliptical, each being present, yet pointing to the other (Garrard 106). For one, they were male, and allegories of the Liberal Arts were depicted as feminine figures. Secondly, the important thing about Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* was that she included *herself* in the



Fig. 3: G. D. Cerrini, *Allegory of Painting with Self-Portrait of the Artist*.

painting, thereby exalting the painter, and as a female, she exalted painting by actually *being* the female allegorical representation. In her work, “painter, model, and concept are one and the same” (Garrard 106). She is so engaged in the act of painting that she doesn’t even notice her loose gold chain and her “unruly” locks of hair. In Gentileschi’s painting, she depicts herself as so thoughtful that we only think about what she is *doing*, and not about her female form. She embodies an allegory in her own human form, suggesting that the artist (herself) didn’t need recognition. Instead, art itself warranted the highest recognition as an intellectual pursuit.