

The Manipulation of the Artistic Persona in the Self Portraits of Caravaggio and Artemisia

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The self-portrait is a phenomenon that has never ceased to spark interest in the personality behind the paintings. It has been interpreted to be a projection of the artist's psyche, with the capacity to reveal personal spiritual beliefs, and one's deepest emotions. The integration of the self-portrait into religious compositions, and single figure portraiture, have been perceived by scholars to be an indication of the artist's true self. This essay will take the approach that the self-portraits embedded in the religious paintings by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi were calculated to stimulate interest in their artistic personas. Between the specific religious figures they chose to model in their paintings, and the methods they employed to give themselves agency in their compositions, they elevated the role of the artist in the seventeenth century. Caravaggio created mystery surrounding his personality by embedding himself as a spectator in several compositions, then took a dramatic turn with a gory self-representation as the severed head of Goliath. Artemisia disrupted the passive norms of female representation with blatant single figure self-portraits that intentionally provoked a personal comparison between the power of the artist, and the religious figure she was representing. Therefore, the ways in which Caravaggio and Artemisia incorporated themselves into their paintings were strategic manipulations of their artistic personas, and a means of self-advertising that ultimately elevated the role of the artist in the seventeenth century.

Caravaggio's contemporary Bellori interpreted that the dark and violent nature of his painting style was a direct projection of his restless temperament. ^[i] Since Caravaggio's success,

the relationship between his perceived psyche and his work, greatly impacted its reception. The mystery surrounding his vulgar tendencies became fused with his work, possibly stimulating more interest in his persona than in his paintings themselves.

In several of his religious compositions Caravaggio inserted himself as the role of an onlooker. In *The Taking of Christ* (Fig. 1.) and the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, (Fig. 2) he is watching a moment of action take place and it is uncertain what his specific role is within both of these compositions. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* it has been speculated that Caravaggio is reflecting on his own life of sin, and his expression is remorseful. Or could it have been that Caravaggio was the person to commit the murder of Saint Matthew, and is actively fleeing the scene, looking back at what he has done. By inserting himself in an enigmatic role, Caravaggio excites curiosity around the subject of his own beliefs and internal conflicts.

This arrives at the idea of the persona; the features of one's personality that they present, and that is subsequently perceived by others. Caravaggio actively portrayed himself as a villain in his paintings. This was an intentional decision made on personal grounds that were unlikely to have been influenced by his patrons. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that Caravaggio actually wanted people to perceive him as a villain. With this to consider, could his villainous self-portraits have also been provocations directed at figures such as Bellori who had the power to activate fascination surrounding Caravaggio's work?

In his *David with the Head of Goliath*, (Fig. 3) Caravaggio strays from the way he typically integrates himself as a spectator, and instead aims attention at himself as the severed head of Goliath, in all of his shame and misery. This was a personal and intentional decision. He is responsible for the creation of his own image, and he chose to represent himself as a sinner. Although he is portraying himself in a negative role, it shows the power that he holds as the

artist, over his audience's perceptions of him. Caravaggio as the painter, is in complete control, and therefore every external perception formed about his persona was predetermined by him when he decided to paint himself as the villain. The amount of psychoanalytical reading into this self-portrait introduces a philosophical element to his reception as an artist. Caravaggio choosing to portray himself as Goliath is perceived as a reflection of his own remorse and punishment for his personal sin. It has also been read as an homage to the hurt he experienced when his homosexual relationship with his lover ended. His lover is featured in his painting as David, who clutches Goliath's head in his outstretched hand. In Caravaggio's decision to paint his rumoured lover as David, he would have been knowingly fueling the rumours surrounding his homosexuality. Thus, he is stimulating another conversation around his personal life, and essentially provoking a reaction from his audience that he most likely intended. Therefore, with the power that he has over with audience's perceptions of him, he makes a statement about the artist's power over their own reputation.

The Borghese *David with the Head of Goliath* is thought by Poseq to be an allusion to a classical sculpture that he would have been familiar with in Rome; *Apollo Tortor*^[ii] (Fig. 4). The sculpture was a representation of Apollo holding in his outstretched hand the flayed skin of Marsyas, in an exemplary tale of a mortal who challenges the musical and therefore the artistic ability of a God. The way that Caravaggio depicts David with the slight downward turn of the head and contrapposto, mimics Apollo in the engraving of *Apollo Tortor*. Poseq notes that Caravaggio was not the first artist to take inspiration from this classical sculpture, as he relates Michelangelo's self-portrait as St. Bartholomew flayed to Marsyas. It is suggested that Caravaggio was attempting to embody the role of the tortured artist by portraying himself as

Goliath, and internalises his “melancholy” as something to be proud of.^[iii] He is comparing himself to Marsyas, and is exploiting the persona of the tormented artist as a means of drawing attention to himself in *David with the Head of Goliath*. Additionally, the fact that Michelangelo had also made an idealised self-portrait as a religious figure in this nature, most likely would have been an influence for Caravaggio. By following the precedent set by Michelangelo, the favoured Renaissance artist, Caravaggio draws a personal comparison that gives credit to his own status as an artist.

Artemisia was also in the business of inventing her own artistic image, however, unlike Caravaggio, Artemisia used her own features to represent female saints in single figure compositions. Single figure portraits are meditative by nature, and navigate all focus onto the portrait of the subject, so that the audience is encouraged to feel empathy and admiration towards them. Her self-portrait as *Saint Catherine (Fig. 5)* comes to mind, for her jarring expression that somehow manages to reveal itself as both angry and gentle. Locker entertains the ambiguity surrounding Artemisia as the artist, and as the subject. In dressing and appearing as Saint Catherine, she is not attempting to become her, but insinuating a bold comparison, that pushes the boundaries of modesty and gives her a sense of agency that possibly even distracts from the subject. Locker raises an interesting point that if the sole purpose of the painting was to serve as a devotional image or an authentic representation of Saint Catherine, Artemisia does little to idealize her face.^[iv] She maintains a trueness to her own features, that creates ambiguity around her persona, which makes the viewer ponder the significance of the artist in addition to the subject. By blurring the lines between her role as the artist and as the subject, she highlights her importance, and her ability to bring biblical subjects to life in her paintings.

By inserting themselves into religious paintings, Caravaggio and Artemisia were giving the role of the artist new meaning and attention. One of the key elements that contributed to the elevation of the role of the artist was the introduction of *La Pittura*, the allegory of painting, into the Liberal Arts.^[v] The introduction of painting as an allegory, validated that the job of the artist is rooted in intellect and philosophy that was prior only associated with more “elevated” subjects such as Dialect, Rhetoric and Grammar.^[vi] Painters were using it as an excuse to incorporate their self-portraits into their paintings, and emphasize their personal artistry and their capacity for intellectual comprehension. *La Pittura* came to be personified as female, and male painters resorted to featuring themselves in the act of painting her in their studios. They portrayed themselves with lavish dress and dignified expressions, to come across gentlemanly, educated, and self-aware. Based on the presumption that Artemisia is modeling as *La Pittura* in *The Allegory of Painting*, (Fig. 6) it would seem she saw an opportunity to represent herself in a way that male artists could not, by physically embodying the elevated status of the allegory. Garrard describes Artemisia’s representation as *Pittura* to be more humble than male artists were capable of when approaching the subject.^[vii] However, the very unique ability she had as a woman to use herself to become the allegory and truly give herself a sense of agency, is empowering. Perhaps this was the ultimate attempt at self-marketing that specifically shone a light on her ability as an individual female artist. What is most interesting is that she did not try to mimic her male peers, she approaches the subject as only a woman can, and surpasses them in the process, marking herself today as a feminist historical figure.^[viii]

Artemisia used several devices to dramatize her role as the painter. She incorporates the material attributes associated with *La Pittura*, including the pendant and chain that represent imitation, the unkempt hair which defines the artistic temperament, and the colour gradient of her dress that represents the artist's ability to manipulate colour.^[ix] The natural integration of these attributes combined with her engagement in her practice, gives her a sense of agency. She captures herself in the act of painting, holding her palette in one hand, and her paint brush delicately in the other. She is not looking at her audience, instead she squints her eyes in a way that contemplates a moment of intense concentration, which alludes to the intellect newly associated with the production of art. Her body positioning as she is painting is unrealistic. It would be inconvenient for an artist to stand bending to the side with their arms spread out, but she makes it seem almost natural, emphasizing the artist's mental and physical strain. She employs this dramatization to draw attention to the role of the artist.

Webster makes an interesting comparison between Artemisia's self-representation in the *Allegory of Painting* and Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*. Caravaggio uses different ways to emphasize himself in the painting, and it is important to note that during the creation of this painting he was in the prime of his career in Rome.^[x] He stands to the far right, holding a lamp as though he is illuminating the scene. However, one can notice based on direction of light, that is hitting the other faces in the composition, that only his face is illuminated by the artificial light. While all of the other figures seem to be engaged in a tussle of movement and strain, Caravaggio's presence serves as a juxtaposition of stillness and calm, however, his purpose in the composition is unclear. His distance from this aggressive movement, suggests that he is not a

part of the arrest, but rather an onlooker witness to one of the most dramatic moments from the Bible.

Important to note are all of the hands in the painting. The figure on the far left's hand is agonizingly tense and activated, and Christ's hands are interlocked in discomfort. Webster notes that Caravaggio's hand, like Artemisia's, is positioned in the way he would hold his paintbrush between his thumb and index finger. In doing so Caravaggio is highlighting the artist's ability to bring light to biblical scenes, and art historian Langdon goes as far as to suggest that he is symbolically paving the way for younger artists to follow his true-to-nature way of painting . [xi]

When artists paint in a looser style the palm often faces outward. The delicate balance of his forefinger and his thumb, indicate the position of the hand engaged in detail painting, which must be done in closer proximity to the canvas. These subtle details emphasize his painterly skill. Therefore, *The Taking of Christ* is an example of how regardless of the intensity and religious significance of the subject, Caravaggio still finds a way to emphasize the importance of the artist, quite literally illuminating his role, like Artemisia elevates her artistic integrity in *The Allegory of Painting*.

The most important thing to recognize in both of these paintings is that while they are attempting to elevate the role of the artist in general, they are doing it in a personal way through the use of the self-portrait, simultaneously forming their individual artistic personas, taking advantage of the new way of perceiving art as a subject worthy of recognition. Through their self-portraits Artemisia and Caravaggio brought new life to role of the artist, and raised their own professional status.

The intrigue surrounding the complexities of the self-portrait is a phenomenon that will go on forever. Caravaggio and Artemisia are key figures that used the self-portrait to highlight

the role of the artist in their paintings. Caravaggio used his own features to represent an onlooker, a villain and an enlightened artist. In *David with the Head of Goliath* he becomes the inventor of his own artistic persona, and draws comparisons between himself and his tortured predecessors. In doing so he provokes conversations about his true self, and in each way that he incorporates his portrait into his compositions, he takes on a mysterious role which causes the audience to consider the meaning of his self-portraits. The intriguing ambiguity that comes through in his self-portraits is matched by his contemporary Artemisia, who elevates not only herself as a female artist in the seventeenth century, but also the capability of the artist in an intellectual context. The mystery surrounding her role as the subject and as the artist in *The Allegory of Painting* stimulates interest in her artistic persona. The visual devices she uses to create drama give her a sense of agency that breaks the boundaries set for her as a female painter, and redefines the importance of the artist. With this said, through the controlled manipulation of their self-portraits, Caravaggio and Artemisia give new meaning to the role of the artist in the seventeenth century, and ultimately elevate their own artistic identities.

Appendix

Figure 1. Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, 1599-1600.

Figure 2. Caravaggio, *The Taking of Christ (The Betrayal)*, 1602.

Figure 3. Caravaggio, *David with the Head of Goliath*, 1610.

Figure 4. *Apollo Tortor*, 17th century engraving.

Figure 5. Artemisia Gentileschi, *St. Catherine*, 1616.

Figure 6. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Allegory of Painting*, 1638-39.

[i] Stone, David. *Self and Myth in Caravaggio's David and Goliath*. University of Delaware Press, 2006, 36.

[ii] Poseq, Avigdor. *Caravaggio's Self Portrait*. *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/ Journal of Art History*. Routledge, 2008, 173.

[iii] Poseq, Avigdor. *Caravaggio's Self Portrait*. *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/ Journal of Art History*. Routledge, 2008, 173.

[iv] Locker. *L'immagine dell'autrice: Artemisia's Self Portraits Revisited*. Yale University Press, 2015, 134.

[v] Smith, Gay Lynn Pendleton. *Artemisia Gentileschi: Taking Her Place among the Masters*. Order No. 1380101, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 1996, 91. <https://proxy.queensu.ca/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/304281366?accountid=6180>.

[vi] Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi's Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*. College Art Association, 1980, 99.

[vii] Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi's Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*. College Art Association, 1980, 107.

[viii] Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*. New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1998, 141.

[ix] Garrard, Mary D. *Artemisia Gentileschi's Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*. College Art Association, 1980, 97.

[x] Webster, Andrew Michael. *The Embedded Self-Portrait in Italian Sacred Art of the Cinquecento and Early Seicento*. Order No. 1538577, University of Oregon, 2013, 104. <https://proxy.queensu.ca/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1373382663?accountid=6180>.

[xi] Webster, Andrew Michael. *The Embedded Self-Portrait in Italian Sacred Art of the Cinquecento and Early Seicento*. Order No. 1538577, University of Oregon, 2013, 108. <https://proxy.queensu.ca/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1373382663?accountid=6180>.

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