

ARTS 2C History of Art: Europe from the Baroque Period Through Impressionism

Week 2 Writing, Spring 2023 Quarter, De Anza College

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Prompt: Utilizing Artemisia Gentileschi's painting of *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, compare it to Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (see the last slide in Lecture 5). How are they both prime examples of the Italian Baroque style? How do they differ? One painting is by a female artist, the other by a man. Is it obvious which is which? Why, or why not?

Length: one paragraph would be great, but you are welcome to go beyond a paragraph if you have a lot to say! You will not be graded on spelling or grammar because I am really just interested in reading your thoughts.



Both *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, c.1602 by Caravaggio and *Judith Slaying Holofernes*,

c.1620 painted by Artemisia Gentileschi are early 17th century Italian Baroque paintings. Both paintings have three human figures: Judith, Holofernes, and Judith's female assistant. Both works have a dark black ground that places the viewers into an unnamed space with the use of Tenebrism. Both works put Holofernes on the left side laying on a bed with a white bed sheet. However, Holofernes depicted by Caravaggio face down and Holofernes by Gentileschi face up.

Both works employed ruby red velvet to enhance the bloody scene but with different placement. Caravaggio placed a ruby red velvet curtain on the upper left of the canvas, above where Holofernes lay. Gentileschi rendered a ruby red velvet blanket covering Holofernes. Holofernes by Caravaggio is under a moss green blanket instead. In both works, the curtain/blanket, all other cloths, and the skin of all three characters are carefully rendered with gradient shading in Chiaroscuro. In both works, Judith is rendered with early 17th century Italy dress in marigold outer garment and white inner garment. Both depicted Judith in a three-quarter view facing the left. Both dresses have a low square neckline and expose her upper part of the chest. The pattern on the marigold outer garment of both works are very similar. Judith by Gentileschi seems to also wear a red inner garment between her marigold outer garment and her white inner garment. Both paintings show Judith wearing earring on her left ear. Caravaggio rendered the earring clearly as a pearl one while Gentileschi depicted it with subtle reflection lines in the dark shadow. Judith by Caravaggio looks like a young teenage girl playing Judith in a high school Judith Beheading Holofernes drama musical play. Judith by Gentileschi is in her late 30 or early 40 and strong. Both Judith pull up their sleeves. Judith by Gentileschi wears a gold bracelet on her left forearm. The bracelet appeared to be made by several round blue cameos bordered by gold decoration. The highest resolution of the image I can find of that painting does not allow me to clearly identify what was rendered in those cameos, but I suspect if we can carefully examine the detail, it may have some interesting findings. In both paintings, Judith's right hand holds a sword slaying Holofernes' neck. In the rendering by Caravaggio, Judith's left hand is pulling Holofernes' hair. In Gentileschi's version, Judith's left hand is pushing against the head of Holofernes, twisting his head against the bed. In both works, Judith's both arms are fully extended.

Beside the similarity and subtle differences already mentioned above, we observe major differences between these two paintings in the following four areas: 1. The orientation of the painting. 2. The composition of the painting. 3. How Judith's assistant is depicted. 4. How the blood is rendered in the painting.

First, their orientation is different. Both paintings are in similar height around 145 cm but the Caravaggio one is wider as 195 cm and the Gentileschi one is 108 cm. Therefore, Caravaggio's work is framed in a horizontal setting, but the one by Gentileschi is a vertical one. Notice both works are using roughly a 3:4 ratio between height and width.

Second, Caravaggio employed a horizontal composition and placed Judith's both arms in the center. The black background on top and below her arms orderly divided the canvas into two halves. On the left half is the Holofernes, and on the right half is Judith and her assistant. Gentileschi, on the other hand, depicted a scene of struggle and chaos, without order. The center is the sword, positioned vertically like a cross, showing the justice from God is in the center of this painting. From that center, the seven limbs of the three characters fanned out forming a large explosion, while the blood of Holofernes splashed out as a smaller explosion. The head of the assistant is vertically placed on top of the head of Holofernes. The face of the assistant is shown to the viewer as a from above view, vertically looking down symbolizing righteousness and justice, while the head of Holofernes is tilted, symbolizing evil and wickedness. The Holofernes by Caravaggio is struggling to get up. The Holofernes by Gentileschi is battling against the two females to keep himself alive. Caravaggio depicts a scene in which the two female figures in the painting didn't touch the skin of the male, noticing that Judith's left hand only holds the hair of Holofernes, but not touching his skin. Gentileschi, instead, depicts a battle ground where both females actively, forcefully, and physically fight against Holofernes with their full weight and

strength. In summary, Caravaggio's composition is a static horizontal scene, while Gentileschi's composition is in a shell shape, dynamic, fanning out explosion.

Third, in Caravaggio's rendering, her assistant looks like an angry female bystander observing how the youth Judith performs a poor job as an amateur actress playing a mediocre act in her high school musical performance. She appears very old and is in profile view. Her two hands hold a cloth and wait for Judith to finish her job before she can clean up the mess. She is not playing an active role in the scene, at least not yet. On the other hand, Gentileschi rendered her as a much younger girl, around 20 years old, using her own weight, positioning herself on top of Holofernes and using her both arms, and her full weight to push down the struggling Holofernes. Both assistants were wearing similar outfits, with white scarves covering their hair. But one is depicted as active, while the other as passive.

Finally, the differences in the handling of blood in these two paintings is also very interesting. Caravaggio renders the blood thick like ketchup, orderly dispensed by squeezing a hidden plastic ketchup bottle toward the lower left. The flow of blood is in control. It is bright red and thick, but somehow has not stained the white bedsheet yet. The brightness of the red hints the blood came from the artery, where the blood just came out from his lung and was full of oxygen. On the other hand, Gentileschi renders the blood splashing everywhere. It dripped down on the white bed sheet and even flowed down the floor, out of the viewing region. It splashed toward the right, and stained the four arms of the two females, Juidth's beautiful marigold outer garment, and even Juidth's right upper chest. The color of the blood is darker, showing the blood came from his vein, instead of from his artery. In summary, Gentileschi depicted a dramatic bloody scene, and Caravaggio depicted an orderly staged play of Juidth's story in a drama performance.

What Gentileschi rendered is a realistic view of what two women would do to complete the difficult mission. On the other hand, the painting by Caravaggio seems aiming for a very different goal. It seems he renders the scene by certain constraints that are set upon him, for example, not letting the female touch the male's skin in the painting. Clearly segregate the gender on the two sides of the canvas with a clear division line. The two female figures show no fear or courage while performing their tasks. It looks like they are slaying a chicken or dissecting a frog in a biology lab class rather than killing a person who might fight back. I do not think it is obvious that one painter is a female and the other is a male, but rather, I think it is obvious they have two different goals and constraints while they painted their subject and story.