

The Signature on the Sword: The Secret of Attributions

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What is the secret of attributions? The exciting story of *David and Goliath*, a work of art allegedly painted by Artemisia Gentileschi and instead attributed for centuries to Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri. The final word on the story, however, has yet to be written...

For many years, a large oil on canvas from the seventeenth century depicting the biblical story of David and Goliath was attributed to a pupil of Orazio Gentileschi, Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri. In 1975, the painting was sold by Sotheby's with this attribution. However, in 1996, art historian and seventeenth-century specialist Gianni Papi contested the attribution, assuming that the painting was actually the work of Orazio's daughter, the painter Artemisia Gentileschi.

So credible was Papi's opinion that in 2018 an auction house in Munich, after first attributing the work to the Caravaggio school and then receiving a notice from Papi, reassigned the painting to Artemisia and sold it for €104,000 to a private collector in the United Kingdom.

What are the possibilities and limits of attributions? Let's take a closer look at how attributions are made in art history. In general, attributions of Artemisia's works are highly contested. There are conflicting estimates of the number of works attributable to her, ranging from 38 to 65, with 120 still under discussion, including studio collaborations, replicas of lost works by her, copies made by other artists and works that are probably not hers.

Initially, in 1996, Papi relied on one of the three tools of due diligence, *connoisseurship*, by which he visually evaluated some stylistic traits that he considered unique for Artemisia's work and comparable to other paintings known to her. For example, he described the characteristic "atmosphere" of her paintings and the "sinuous figure" of David, with a "distinctive proud and fresh virility." But since the work was known only through a black and white photograph, Papi, by his own admission, had never been able to see the work in person. In 1999, Artemisia specialist, R. Ward Bissell, author of the artist's catalogue raisonné, rejected Papi's hypothesis, claiming, again through connoisseurship, that he considered the work in question to be painted "in a rather too cute manner that would be uncharacteristic of Artemisia." From these examples we can understand that connoisseurship, which is based on a strong intuition and knowledge of the artist's work, is not sufficiently reliable as the only way to make an attribution.

In fact, Papi, in continuing his research, relied on a second tool, *provenance*, which attempts to trace the chain of ownership of a work back to the artist through original documents. He cites a letter of the 18th century written by the art historian and politician Horace Walpole, who notes that King Charles I owned several paintings by Artemisia, the best of which was a "David with the head of Goliath." Biographical documents confirm that Artemisia went to England in the late 1630s and therefore Papi speculated that she made the painting while she was there. However, it has not been possible to find documentary confirmation that this painting is the one described by Walpole, since the subject of David and Goliath was a favorite of both Artemisia and her father and we know that she made at least two versions. Therefore, this thesis of the provenance cannot be sufficient to guarantee a new attribution.

A few months ago, the current owner sent the work to the studio of London restorer Simon Gillespie. Technical analysis through scientific instruments used today during a restoration is the third tool currently available to art history to make attributions. Through this, scientists examine

techniques and materials, taking X-rays and infrared images to look for layers of the painting that are not visible to the naked eye, such as the artist's *pentimenti* or areas that have been repainted during restoration. This process must be conducted by conservation scientists and restorers and their results need to be contextualized in dialogue with art historians and other scientists who have worked on the artist's paintings.

Gillespie and his team found pigments that they believed conformed to Artemisia's palette, such as the ochre of David's cloak and other possible compatibility with works known to be by her. The most surprising thing, however, was the revelation, after the cleaning that removed the subsequent repainting, of a faded signature with the words "Artemisia," the remains of the word "Fe" (probably *Fecit*) and "16-" engraved vertically on David's sword. The last two numbers of the date were faded and unreadable. Thanks to Gillespie's scientific analysis, Papi's intuition has become far more plausible. However, we must always be careful to rely only on signatures for attributions, because we know that there are cases where they were added by a subsequent disciple, dealer or owner.

In 2020, Popes and Gillespie published a new article in which they stated their hypothesis. The article, accompanied by the results of scientific examinations, appears in the March issue of *The Burlington Magazine*, an internationally recognized peer-reviewed academic journal, in order to open the discussion to the extended community of art historians.

In the case of *David and Goliath*, the discovery of the signature on the sword is certainly a promising clue. The position of the signature on the sword is bold. According to Gentileschi specialist Judith W. Mann, who curated the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in 2011, to date we have reliable information about only 19 of Gentileschi's signed works. Through the particular positions of her signatures, Artemisia enriched the mythological and biblical subjects of her paintings with meaning and extended the enjoyment of her learned patrons, increasing her job perspectives and reputation in a unique way.

For example, Artemisia often engraved her name on objects in the painting, such as the wall of the stone fountain behind Susanna in her *Susanna and the Elders*, as if to say that her name would be permanently engraved in stone, just like her fame. Other times she wrote her name on a piece of paper lying on the floor of her paintings. Sometimes she would separate her signature into 2-3 lines, sometimes into a single line, sometimes horizontal, sometimes vertical, and sometimes, as in her *Minerva*, she would sign creating a decorative arch around Minerva's shield. On her *Clio, the Muse of History*, Artemisia courageously affixed her signature in the Book of Fame held by Clio, on whose pages she engraved a dedication with her name: as if to publicize her name and guarantee her fame in history through her painting. The signature on David's sword could be yet another of the devices skillfully created by Artemisia. Is Gillespie's discovery the definitive proof of the attribution? This will be the subject of discussion and decision by future scholars.

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