

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 BST ON SUNDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 2023

Lost Artemisia Gentileschi painting rediscovered in the Royal Collection

A rare surviving painting by Artemisia Gentileschi, the greatest female artist of her generation, has been rediscovered in the Royal Collection after being misattributed at least two centuries ago.

The rediscovered painting, *Susanna and the Elders*, forms a significant addition to Artemisia's extant body of work and sheds fresh light on her creative process and her time in London in the late 1630s, working alongside her father at the court of Charles I and Henrietta Maria.

Following extensive conservation, the painting has gone on display for visitors to Windsor Castle. Shown alongside it are *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* ('*La Pittura*'), considered one of Artemisia's greatest works, and *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* by her father Orazio Gentileschi, painted during his time in London. The three paintings form a new temporary display in the Queen's Drawing Room, taking their place alongside other Stuart masterpieces in the Royal Collection.



The rediscovery resulted from work by Royal Collection Trust curators, notably former staff member and art historian Dr Niko Munz, to trace the paintings sold off and scattered across Europe after Charles I's execution. Seven paintings by Artemisia were recorded in Charles I's inventories but only the *Self-Portrait* was thought to survive today, with the others thought lost. However, research allowed curators to match the description of *Susanna and the Elders* to a painting that had been in store at Hampton Court Palace for over 100 years, attributed to 'French School' and in very poor condition. A 'CR' ('Carolus Rex') brand has subsequently been found on the back of the canvas during conservation treatment, confirming that the painting was once in Charles I's collection.

Artemisia Gentileschi gained fame across Europe in the 17th century, a time when few women artists were formally recognised. She trained with her father in Rome and later worked in Florence, Naples, Venice and London for aristocratic and royal patrons. Her work fell out of favour in the 18th and 19th centuries, but in the last 50 years she has become known for her powerful and empathetic depictions of women from history.

Anna Reynolds, Deputy Surveyor of The King's Pictures, said, 'We are so excited to announce the rediscovery of this important work by Artemisia Gentileschi. Artemisia was a strong, dynamic and exceptionally talented artist whose female subjects – including Susanna – look at you from their canvases with the same determination to make their voices heard that Artemisia showed in the male-dominated art world of the 17th century.'

The rediscovered painting depicts the Biblical story of Susanna, who is surprised by two men while bathing in her garden. When she refuses their advances, she is faced with a false accusation

of infidelity, punishable by death, before she is proven innocent. While male artists of the period often presented an idealised or sexualised view of the scene, Artemisia gives great emphasis to Susanna's vulnerability and discomfort as she twists her body away from the lecherous men. It is a story that Artemisia returned to many times over her 40-year career; at least six compositions of the subject by the artist are known today. The story may have held particular resonance given her own experience of sexual assault, having been raped at age 17 by an artist in her father's workshop and subjected to gruelling questioning and torture at his trial.

The painting's history can be traced in a remarkably unbroken line, with records found in every century since its creation. It was commissioned by Henrietta Maria, probably around 1638–9, during Artemisia's brief time in London when she was likely assisting her elderly father in his work. The 1639 inventory by Abraham van der Doort, Surveyor of The King's Pictures to Charles I, shows that the painting originally hung above a fireplace in the Queen's Withdrawing Chamber at Whitehall Palace – a relatively private room used by Henrietta Maria for receiving small numbers of officials, eating and relaxing.

Dr Niko Munz said, 'One of the most exciting parts of this painting's story is that it appears to have been commissioned by Queen Henrietta Maria while her apartments were being redecorated for a royal birth. *Susanna* first hung above a new fireplace – probably installed at the same time as the painting – emblazoned with Henrietta Maria's personal cipher 'HMR' ('Henrietta Maria Regina'). It was very much the Queen's painting.'

The painting was returned to Charles II shortly after the Restoration in 1660 and is thought to have hung above a fireplace at Somerset House, home to queens and consorts including Catherine of Braganza and Queen Anne. In the 18th century, as Artemisia's reputation waned, the painting appears to have lost its attribution. It was moved to Kensington Palace, where it is depicted in a watercolour of the Queen's Bedchamber published in 1819 leaning against a wall, suggesting it was considered the work of a minor or unknown artist and not worthy of hanging. It was later transferred to Hampton Court Palace, where at some point it lost its frame, and in 1862 it was described as 'in a bad state' and sent for restoration, at which point additional layers of varnish and overpaint were likely applied.

Since its rediscovery, the painting has undergone significant treatment by Royal Collection Trust conservators. Work included the painstaking removal of centuries of surface dirt, discoloured varnish and non-original paint layers to reveal the original composition; removing canvas strips that were added to enlarge the painting sometime after its creation; relining the canvas; retouching old damages; and commissioning a new frame.

Analysis of the painting during conservation has confirmed the reattribution and given an insight into Artemisia's working practices. She is thought to have travelled with a stock of tracings or drawings that she used to create new compositions, and conservators found that at least four parts of the painting were also used in previous works, including the Elders' heads and Susanna's face. Artemisia must have considered this *Susanna* particularly accomplished, as she reused elements of the figure in at least three versions of her later painting *Bathsheba*. X-radiography (used to analyse aspects of a work not visible to the naked eye) and infrared reflectography (used to make underdrawing visible) have also revealed changes that Artemisia made to the composition, uncovering a large fountain that she subsequently painted out with trees.

Adelaide Izat, Paintings Conservator, said, 'When it came into the studio, *Susanna* was the most heavily overpainted canvas I had ever seen, its surface almost completely obscured. It has been incredible to be involved in returning the painting to its rightful place in the Royal Collection, allowing viewers to appreciate Artemisia's artistry again for the first time in centuries.'

Ends

The special display of works by Artemisia and Orazio Gentileschi is included in a visit to Windsor Castle until 29 April 2024. Windsor Castle is open to visitors Thursday to Monday, remaining closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Tickets and visitor information: www.rct.uk, T. +44 (0)303 123 7304.

A selection of images is available from [Dropbox](#) (please find captions and credit lines on the attached contact sheet).

B-roll footage of the painting undergoing conservation, including an interview with Paintings Conservator Adelaide Izat, is available to download [here](#) (password: 37fhdk30!j\$). A shot list is available in the Dropbox folder linked above.

For further information and to enquire about press tickets, please contact the Royal Collection Trust Press Office, +44 (0)20 7839 1377, press@rct.uk.

A full account of the painting and its rediscovery will be published by Dr Niko Munz and Adelaide Izat in the October issue of The Burlington Magazine. A proof of the article can be made available upon request.

An online in-conversation event, *Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rediscovered Masterpiece*, will take place on Tuesday, 10 October, 14:00–15:00. Art historian Dr Niko Munz, Paintings Conservator Adelaide Izat and Paintings Curator Emma Stead will share the story behind the rediscovery and subsequent conservation treatment, as well as discussing Artemisia's life and work. Tickets £6.00 from www.rct.uk/whatson.

Instagram: [@royalcollectiontrust](#)

Facebook: [@royalcollectiontrust](#)

Twitter: [@RCT](#)

Royal Collection Trust, a department of the Royal Household, is responsible for the care of the Royal Collection and manages the public opening of the official residences of The King. Income generated from admissions and from associated commercial activities contributes directly to The Royal Collection Trust, a registered charity. The aims of The Trust are the care and conservation of the Royal Collection, and the promotion of access and enjoyment through exhibitions, publications, loans and educational programmes.

The Royal Collection is among the largest and most important art collections in the world, and one of the last great European royal collections to remain intact. It comprises almost all aspects of the fine and decorative arts, and is spread among some 15 royal residences and former residences across the UK, most of which are regularly open to the public. The Royal Collection is held in trust by the Sovereign for his successors and the nation, and is not owned by The King as a private individual.

Admission to Windsor Castle is managed by The Royal Collection Trust, a registered charity in England and Wales (1016972).