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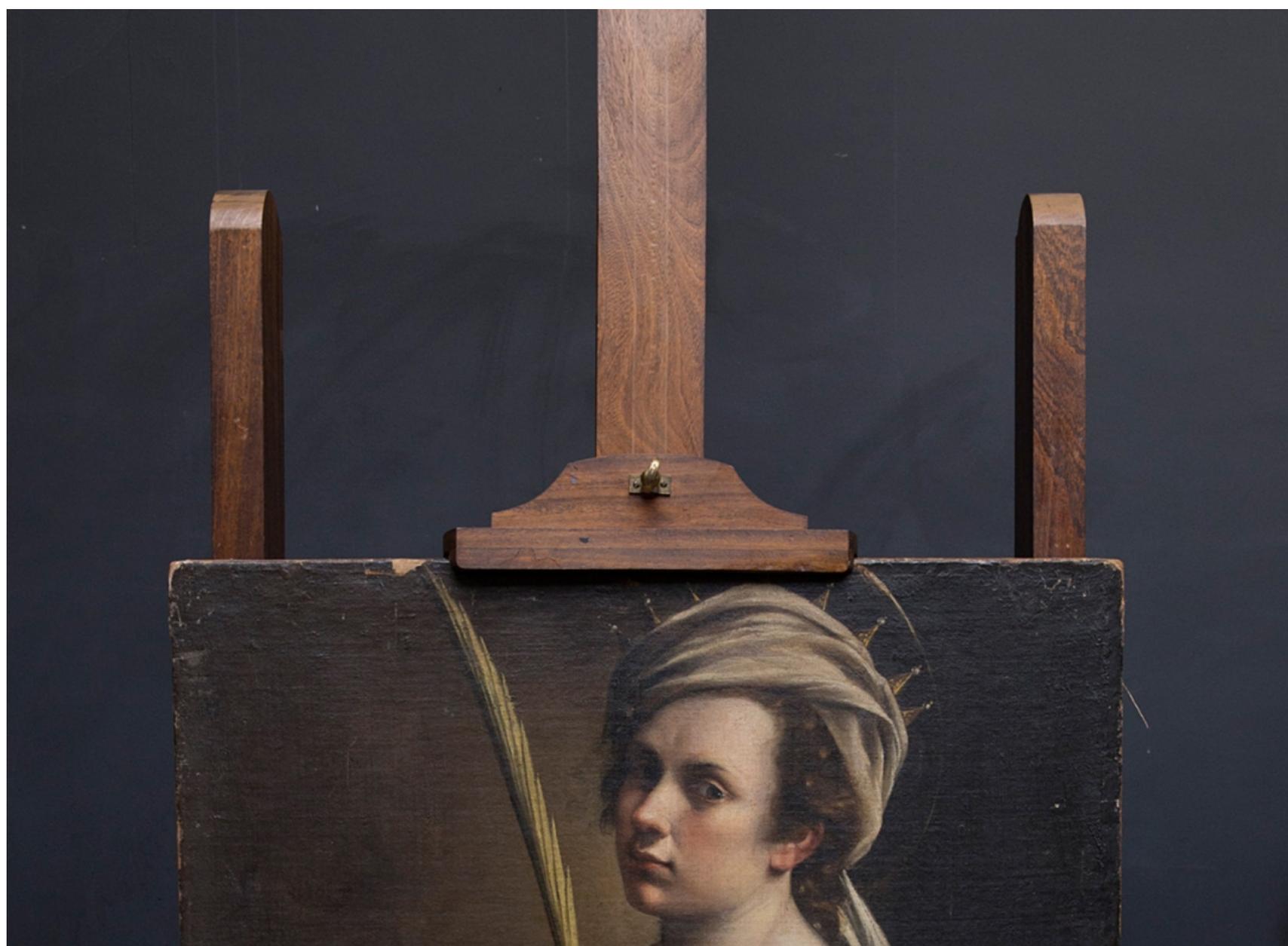
Subject: The National Gallery Acquires Its First Painting by a Woman Since 1991

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The National Gallery Acquires Its First Painting by a Woman Since 1991

The London museum's acquisition of what is believed to be a rare Artemisia Gentileschi self-portrait demands a closer look at the world the artist inhabited in 17th-century Florence.

[Jesse Locker2 days ago](#)





Artemisia Gentileschi, "Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria" on easel (image courtesy of the National Gallery London)

[The National Gallery in London](#) made headlines last week with its [acquisition](#) of a rare self-portrait of 17th-century painter [Artemisia Gentileschi](#) as St. Catherine. The painting was offered for sale in December 2017 by the French antiquary Christophe Joron-Derem and was snatched up by the prominent London-based picture dealers Marco Voena and Fabrizio Moretti for €2,360,600 (\$2,772,675). They then sold it at auction this past spring to a buyer — now known to have been the National Gallery — for \$3.6 million, setting a new record for the artist. Before getting too excited about glass ceilings being broken, however, keep in mind that the Getty bought her father Orazio Gentileschi's admittedly splendid "Danaë" (c. 1623) for \$30.49 million. Moreover, the picture is one of a mere 20 works by women owned by the National Gallery, and the [BBC reported](#) that

it was the museum's first acquisition of a work by a woman artist since 1991.



Artemisia Gentileschi, "Santa Caterina di Alessandria (Saint Catherine of Alexandria)" (1618-1619) (image via [Wikipedia](#))

But make no mistake, the picture is a real gem. A modest 28 x 28 inches in size, and in what appears to be excellent condition, it portrays what is unmistakably the likeness of the artist. With her brown curls, arched eyebrows, prominent brow, and rounded chin and slender neck, the sitter is recognizable, for example, from Gentileschi's "[Self-Portrait as a Lute Player](#)" (1616-18) in the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. She holds the attributes of St. Catherine: a palm of martyrdom in one hand and a spiked wheel in the other, and wears a curious crown-turban-halo hybrid. The tight brushwork, relatively high finish, and compositional parallels indicate that it must have been painted when the artist was in Florence, and 1615-

19 seem the most likely dates. The painting has a particularly close resemblance to the artist's "[St. Catherine of Alexandria](#)" (1615–17) in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, but in the London painting she looks directly out at the viewer, a telltale sign of self-portraiture.

With all the excitement about this historic acquisition, it's surprising to realize that almost nothing has been said about the painting itself. It is in fact a strange and fascinating painting that has few parallels in 17th-century Italy.

The most obvious question is why is the artist dressed as St. Catherine? Like her younger contemporary Rembrandt, Gentileschi seems to have enjoyed painting herself in various disguises. She appears, for example, as the personification of Inclination (the urge that leads one to achieve acts of genius), as an [allegory Painting itself](#), and as a [theatrically costumed lute player](#). A Medici inventory even mentions a beguiling lost painting of "the painter Artemisia in the costume of an Amazon with a sword, shield, and helmet." Modern scholars have suspected they see her face in many celebrated heroines, whether Judith, Susanna, Clio, or Lucretia. Again like Rembrandt's self-portraits, there is a deliberate ambiguity to these works.

Does the artist use herself as a model because it's cheaper than hiring one? Or is she trying to express something about her identity by presenting herself as St. Catherine? Does she share a special bond with the saint? Is she simply play-acting? Is it a memento of a theatrical performance? Even more puzzling is the relationship between the National Gallery "Self-Portrait" and the "St. Catherine" in the Uffizi.

Compositionally, they are nearly identical, though with some slight costume changes. What differentiates them is the artist's gaze: in the Uffizi painting, she looks heavenward — as a good saint should — while in the London painting, she looks out at the viewer. Does this mean that the former is meant to be understood as a painting of a saint and the latter as a self-portrait? Are we meant to say a prayer in front of the former, and

admire the artist's ingenuity in the latter?

The answer to these questions, if there is one, may lie not so much in delving into the artist's psyche as in exploring the particular world Gentileschi inhabited in Florence. She had left her native Rome for the Tuscan capital in 1612, newly married, escaping illiteracy, and the shadow of what is today a notorious rape trial. Although she had family connections in Florence, the details of her past were little known to Florentines, and she was able to leave the sheltered and provincial world of her father's house behind her. For the first time, she entered the sophisticated and cosmopolitan world of the Florentine court, where she came into contact with poets, musicians, intellectuals, and painters, including Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger (nephew of the great artist), Ottavio Rinuccini, Cristofano Allori, and Galileo Galilei. She even took on a lover, the Florentine nobleman Francesco Maria Maringhi, who provided support to both her and, oddly, also her husband. This new worldliness, wit, and poetic refinement is evident in many of the works Gentileschi painted in Florence and may help explain the playful ambiguities of the "Self-Portrait as St. Catherine." When the painting finally goes on display in early 2019, scholars and the public alike will have the chance to consider it for themselves.