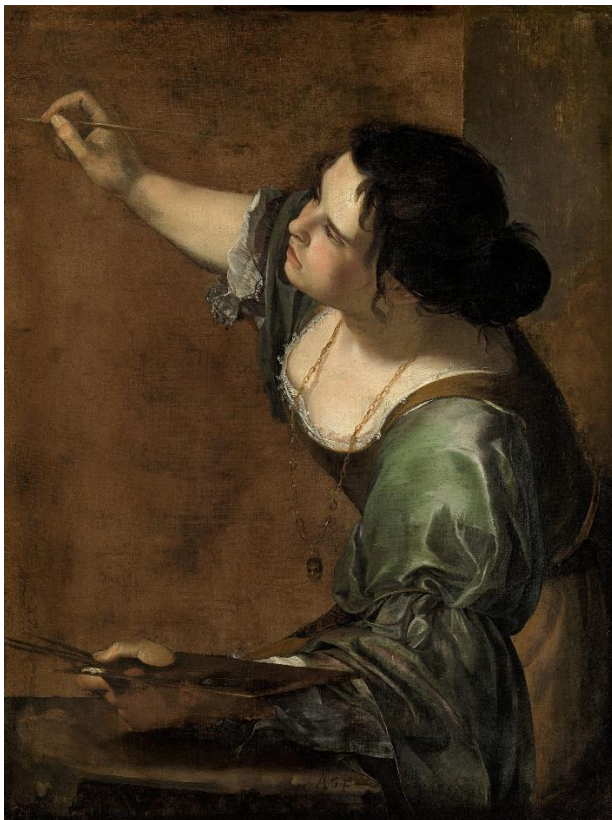


April 24 ART APPRECIATION GROUP – Report by Tony Seward

Notoriously, the contribution of women has been badly neglected in traditional art history courses. For our April meeting, we focused on three of the most high-profile pioneers in what until the late 19th century was an almost entirely male-dominated profession.

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) was one of the most accomplished Italian artists of the Italian Baroque. The drama and latent violence in many of her paintings reflect her life experience. Trained by her father, an established painter in Rome, she was raped by one of his associates, and struggled to establish herself in an independent career. The anger in a picture such as 'Judith Beheading Holofernes' or 'Susanna and the Elders' brings a new urgency to these conventional Biblical subjects, showing women not as passive subjects of the male gaze but as fully rounded human beings capable of decisive action. All these qualities come to the fore in her remarkable self-portrait, made in England when she and her father were working for Charles I.



Artemisia Gentileschi as the Allegory of Painting

Our next choice was the glamorous portrait painter Elizabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755-1842) who excelled in marketing and self-promotion. Like other female artists she generally asserted her professional status by painting herself with the tools of her trade – brushes, paints and easel. Her 'Self-portrait in a Straw Hat' puts her own spin on Rubens' famous 'Le Chapeau de Paille', directly challenging comparison with the master. She prospered In France, gaining the friendship and patronage of Marie-Antoinette, but managed to escape the Revolution unscathed, going on to become a figure of European renown, much in demand for her charming portraits of mothers and children.



Le Brun: Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat

The third in our trinity of remarkable women was Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807), the Swiss painter best known for being one of only two women founder members of the Royal Academy. She too enjoyed an outstandingly successful Europe-wide career, largely due to her skill in networking and her decision to concentrate primarily on history painting, the most prestigious genre. She took full advantage of the new technologies of reproduction, with her images being widely disseminated as engravings and on luxury objects such as porcelain. Her self-portrait shows her with a bust of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom.



Angelica Kauffman: Self-portrait]

Next up – On Wednesday 1 May, Caroline Chapman will join us for a conversation about her new book *A Place Apart. The Artist's Studio 1400-1900*. June's meeting will look at later women artists, including Laura Knight.