

My favourite painting Simon Gillespie

David with the Head of Goliath by Artemisia Gentileschi



***David with the Head of Goliath*, about 1639, 6½ft by 4½ft, by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654 or later), private collection**



Simon Gillespie is a fine-art conservator and restorer based in London

‘In my profession, I have an opportunity to get to know great paintings intimately; I can echo the same position in front of the canvas as the artist and reveal from under layers of dirty old varnish and mismatched later repaint what he or she was attempting to achieve. I love this painting because it shows Artemisia’s virtuosity in creating a three-dimensional object from a plain palette of earth colours. Look closely: there are small gaps between David’s arm and his bent leg, through which the landscape beyond can be seen, with reflections of light from the leg to the arm. This small, sophisticated detail makes a huge difference to the depth of the composition. What a privilege to have worked on this painting.’

John McEwen comments on *David with the Head of Goliath*

THE story of David and Goliath is told in 1 Samuel 17. Only the Israelite boy David from Bethlehem, ‘ruddy and of a fair countenance’, met, in the certainty of God’s deliverance, the challenge of the Philistine giant (9ft 9in) to decide the battle by single combat. His deadly slingshot (note Goliath’s forehead) meant he succeeded Saul as King of Israel, hence the start of Matthew’s gospel: ‘The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.’

Artemisia, already well established in her own right, was in London from 1638 to about 1640, having been invited by Charles I to assist her ailing father Orazio (1563–1639),

who was painting the ceiling of the Queen’s House at Greenwich. This picture certainly fits, both compositionally and in its quality, with the one Horace Walpole referred to in his *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1826–28): ‘King Charles had several of her works. Her best was David with the head of Goliath.’ Written accounts indicate that she made other paintings on this theme, as yet still to be definitively identified.

David bears some resemblance to self-portraits by Artemisia and his hands, too, are believed to have been modelled on her own. Conservation revealed the decisive proof of authenticity: her signature on the blade near the sword hilt. David may not

be ‘ruddy’ or ‘of a fair countenance’, but his nonchalance fits the sibling envy he suffered in the biblical account.

His eldest brother, hearing of his challenge, said: ‘I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thy heart.’ ‘What have I now done?’, complained David. Although the triumph was the Lord’s, David’s nonchalance suggests some personal satisfaction. Artemisia, more than most, knew what it was to triumph over adversity and scorn.

The painting is not in the current exhibition at the National Gallery (*see page 124*), but its reattribution shows discoveries are still possible and it makes a significant contribution to the catalogue of her art. ↪