

Tefaf Maastricht 2022

Collecting

Boom time for female Old Masters

Demand is soaring and Gentileschi has become a household name — and many more are waiting to step into the spotlight



'David and Goliath' (c1630s) was newly attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi in 2018 © Simon Gillespie Studio

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“I still get goosebumps thinking back to that day,” says Palmyre Manivet, associate director at art restorers Simon Gillespie Studio, recalling the moment in 2018 that a colleague uncovered the signature of 17th-century artist Artemisia Gentileschi on a painting of David and Goliath. The thrill Manivet felt reverberated across the art world: a new Gentileschi had been attributed. Dealers, galleries and auction houses must have been delighted too, since the market for female Old Masters has been booming like never before. Gentileschi set a record price of \$5.3mn in 2019.

For centuries, women who were feted by their contemporaries were dismissed after their deaths by art historians, victims of pervasive institutional and societal misogyny. Academic interest in female artists started surging in the 1970s, but auction houses date the market’s rise to around 2017, driven in part by having more women in positions of power in the art world, as well as the #MeToo movement shaking up staid attitudes.

There has been a concerted effort to broaden art holdings, says Calvin Harvey, vice-president at Sotheby’s in New York. “I think everyone, museums and private collectors alike, took a step back and thought about their collections and realised how important it was to make sure they had a diverse collection.”



'Merry Company' by Judith Leyster, sold at Christie's London for £1.8mn in 2018 © Courtesy of Christie's

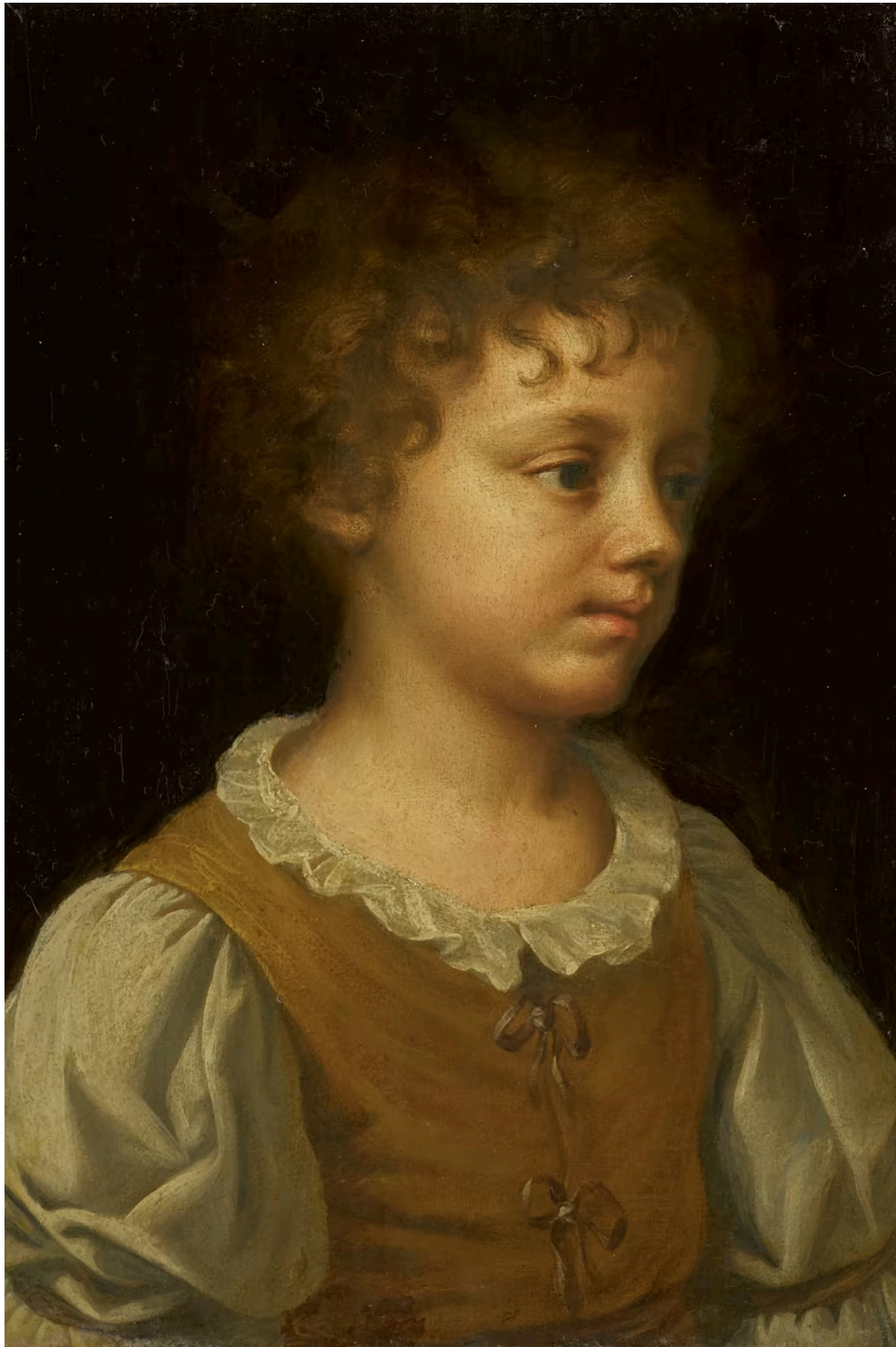


'Head of a Boy' by Michaelina Wautiers, sold at Christie's London for £400,000 last year © Courtesy of Christie's

This has been borne out in prices. Olivia Ghosh, junior specialist in Old Masters at Christie's in London, cites Judith Leyster's "Merry Company", which set a record in 2018 when it sold for £1.8mn, surpassing the artist's previous record of just £485,000 from 2016, huge progress in such a short period of time.

The Flemish artist Michaelina Wautier (1604-89), Gentileschi's rough contemporary, is another case in point. Over the years her work has largely been attributed to her brother or to another painter, Jacob van Oost. But a 2018 retrospective at MAS Antwerp became a blockbuster, after initially struggling to find a venue, and since then prices for Wautier's paintings have shot up. Christie's sold a portrait in 2019 for \$759,000 (it carried an estimate of \$300,000-\$500,000) and a smaller work in 2021 for £400,000 (which was estimated at just £60,000-£80,000).

"It's been pretty amazing to see an artist be completely rediscovered like that and brought to the forefront," says Chloe Stead, senior global director at Colnaghi gallery. "Proof of people's interest in the story of her rediscovery is visible both in the market demand for her works and in the success of that exhibition."

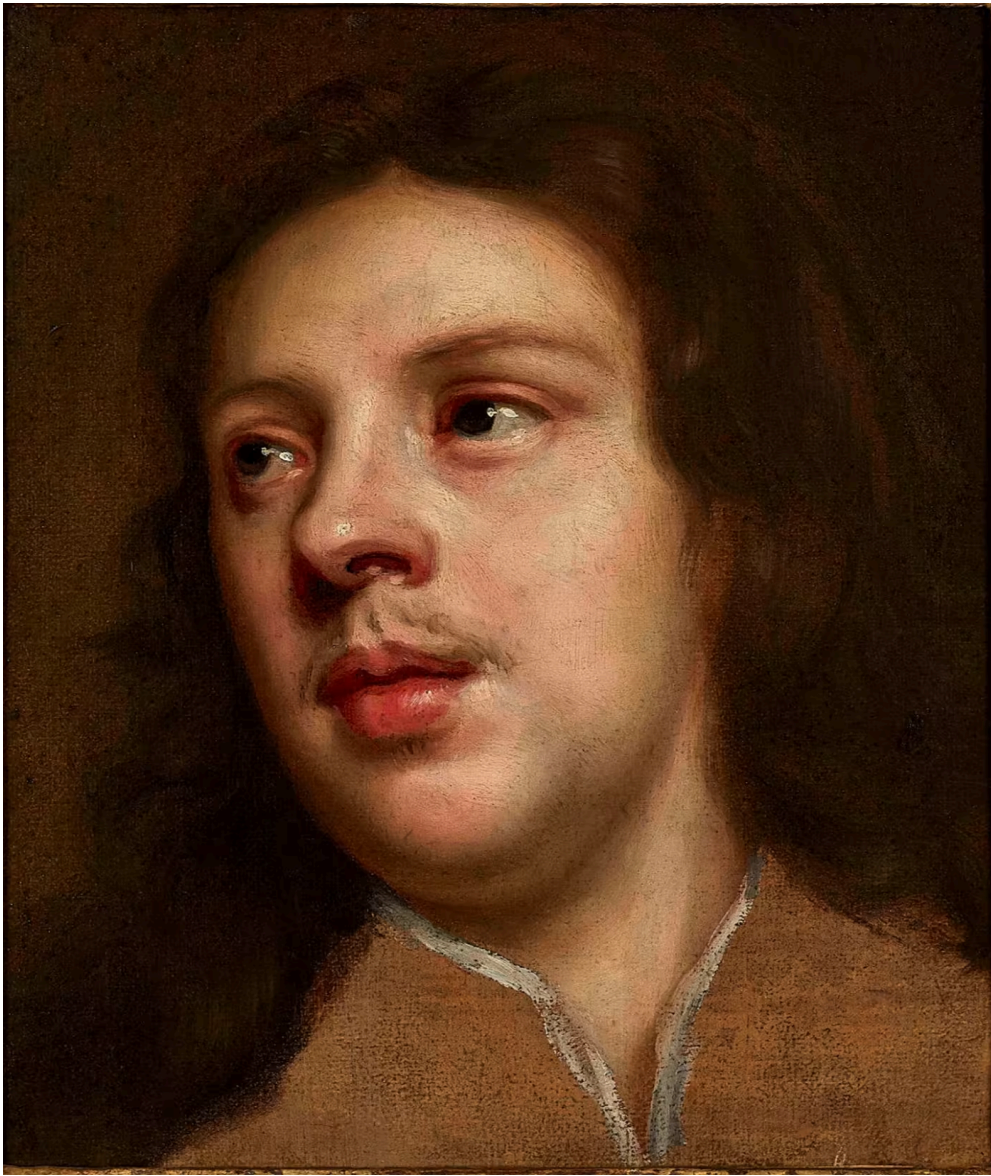


'Portrait of the artist's son, Bartholomew Beale' by Mary Beale, sold for £93,750 at Sotheby's in 2019



A portrait of a boy by Mary Beale, sold for £100,000 at Reeman Dansie in 2021 © Courtesy of Reeman Dansie

Greater interest — academic and commercial — means closer attention is paid to identifying pictures by female Old Masters. In 2021, the English auction house Reeman Dansie sold a small portrait of an angelic-looking boy, attributed as “18th-century Italian School” and valued at just £400-£600. But keen-eyed dealers and collectors recognised similarities to 17th-century English painter Mary Beale — who often painted her children — in its warm and vibrant colours, in its brushstrokes reminiscent of Van Dyck, some of whose works hung in her home. Bids went up and up until the hammer went down at £100,000, setting a new record for Beale (beating £93,750 at Sotheby’s in 2019).



An oil study of Charles Beale, the artist's husband (c1660) by Mary Beale © Courtesy of Weiss Gallery

Similarly, Charles Mackay, director at Weiss Gallery, acquired a portrait of a man last year which had been misattributed to van Oost: “As soon as I saw it, I knew it was a Beale.” This painting will be one of Weiss’s highlights at Tefaf Maastricht (June 24-30) this year.

Celebrity attention seems to have helped the market, too. Designer [Victoria Beckham teamed up with Sotheby’s to display portraits by female Old Masters](#) in her London flagship store in 2018 and, the following year, endorsed Sotheby’s New York show [The Female Triumphant](#), which presented 21 works by 14 different female Old Masters. Harvey says that while “it feels very normal today to think about focusing on selling women artists, we didn’t get all good press when we first did it.”

Critics dismissed it as a gimmick, though records for seven of the artists featured were broken; “Portrait of Muhammad Dervish Khan” by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun sold for \$7.2mn, making it the most expensive female Old Master painting ever. Sales of female artists across major auction houses have been successful — *The Female Triumphant* made \$14.6mn with fees, overshooting the high presale estimate of \$8.9-\$13.2mn — and have brought in new buyers. The purchaser of the Vigée Le Brun (who remains anonymous) had never bought an Old Master painting before. Ghosh from Christie’s says that “the appetite for them has increased exponentially as people come to understand the importance of this strand of art history.”



'Portrait of Muhammad Dervish Khan' (1788) by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, sold at Sotheby's New York for \$7.2mn in 2019

Works by female Old Masters still make up a fraction of the market. Lawrence Hendra, director of Philip Mould Gallery, puts this down in part to a supply problem, based on the “prejudices of the times in which they lived and worked”, which meant “few women were able to pursue careers as artists and as such good examples of works by female artists are hard to find . . . when they do turn up, they are hotly fought over.”

Is there a danger the work becomes overpriced because of the artist's gender? No, says Georgina Hardy, head of Old Master paintings evening sales at Sotheby's in London. She mentions Dutch artist Rachel Ruysch, whose current record is \$2.5mn but whose work in her lifetime was more expensive than Rembrandt's. Today, by contrast, Rembrandt's recent sales have neared €175mn. Though artists such as Gentileschi and Vigée Le Brun can fetch seven-figure sums, most female Old Masters sell for a fraction of that, and even the top female artists' prices are far from the dizzying sums their male contemporaries can command.



'Glass Tazza with Peaches, Jasmine Flowers and Apples' (1607) by Fede Galizia © @D.Farley.

There is, of course, far more to this movement than the market. Eve Straussman-Pflanzer, curator at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, reflecting on the recent Detroit Institute of Arts exhibition *By Her Hand: Artemisia Gentileschi and Women Artists in Italy, 1500-1800*, says: "It was very emotional when the show went up that these women artists and their stories were physically taking up the main exhibition space, a space that had never been given over to them and has not been given over to many women historically. The power of that was not lost on me."

Gentileschi may now be a household name, but there are many more waiting to step into the spotlight: Lavinia Fontana, Fede Galizia, Elisabetta Sirani, Josefa de Óbidos, to name just a few. The field of female Old Masters still offers a tantalising sense of possibility.

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