

“Under the rubble of my house I have lost Artemisia, my companion from three centuries ago who lay breathing gently on the hundred pages I had written”

Anna Banti

“*Artemisia* is lost, but Artemisia, her lamenting phantom presence, is everywhere, irrepressible”

Susan Sontag

On the 4th of August 1944, the retreating German Army blew mines across Florence. The blasts leveled the bridges over the Arno except the Ponte Vecchio and large sections of the Medieval town, including the house of art historians Anna Banti and Roberto Longhi. Within the catastrophe, Banti lost a manuscript she wrote about Artemisia Gentileschi. Three years later, she eventually published a book in which she intertwines a romanticized biography of the baroque painter and her own path.

On the 4th of August 2020, a double explosion in the port of Beirut devastated the city, killing 218, injuring 6500 and causing losses estimated 4 billion USD. A week after the catastrophe, I went to Sursock Palace with my friends Camille Tarazi and Georges Boustany. The once opulent symbol of Beirut's cosmopolitanism and prosperity laid in ruins. The roof was partially wrecked, walls were unstable and hundreds of pieces of furniture and art were smashed. Lady Yvonne Cochrane, its 97-year-old landlord, was injured. She passed away three weeks after the blast.

Lady Cochrane was the only child of Alfred Sursock and Donna Maria Serra di Cassano. When they married in the early 1920s, the Sursocks acquired in Naples an important number of works of art. In the early 1970s, a Samson arrested by the Philistines was identified by art historian Sir Denis Mahon as a lost masterpiece by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as Guercino (1591-1666). It ultimately joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Two decades later, what remained of the paintings collection that remained unpublished was the subject of my Master thesis at the Sorbonne under the supervision of Antoine Schnapper and Véronique Powell. In the course of my research, I ascribed two canvases, *Penitent Magdalene* and *Hercules and Omphale* that was hanged as pendant to Guercino's *Samson* to Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656). I didn't share this finding after my graduation.

The severe condition of Sursock after the Port disaster steered me to produce an emergency inventory of the paintings, emphasizing on significance and conservation issues. In October 2020, I wrote an article in Apollo art magazine about the situation of art and heritage in Beirut. The piece featured a photograph by Georges Boustany depicting Audrey Azoulay, Director General of Unesco, and me in front of *Hercules and Omphale*. The publication was followed by a flow of queries from Artemisia Gentileschi scholars including Mary Garrard, Jesse Locker and Sheila Barker. They were asking for clarifications about these unknown paintings.

On the 20th of April 2021, at the invitation of Sheila Barker, I disclosed my investigation in an online conference organized by the Medici Archive Project in Florence. Notable specialists of the artist including Garrard, Locker and Barker attended the talk and acknowledged my conclusions. A few weeks later, Hrag Vartanian reviewed the presentation in *Hyperallergic*. The story went viral for the first and *Hercules and Omphale* gained wide international coverage.

On the 28th of August 2021, Davide Gasparotto, Senior Curator of Paintings at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, wrote to me. He was interested in helping restore *Hercules and Omphale* by Artemisia Gentileschi. After months of conversation with the Cochranes, Ulrich Birkmaier Senior Conservator of Paintings traveled to Beirut. His encounter with *Hercules and Omphale* took place on the 5th of January, 2022. The painting was laid on its back and looked like a postwar abstract composition. Birkmaier removed shards of glass he placed in an envelope he brought back home. It took six months of formalities and arrangements to let the canvas travel to Los Angeles.

On the 25th of October, 2022, the Getty publicized the restoration project in conjunction with the The New York Times. The piece acknowledged that “this painting is definitely by Artemisia,” according to Davide Gasparotto, adding that “Buchakjian’s visual analysis was convincing.” The day after, the story went viral with articles in The Art Newspaper, *Hyperallergic* and The Times of London. The Times went back to my student years at the Sorbonne in order to explain why my discovery didn’t go public: “He was also intimidated by his discovery. “Imagine if you were director of the National Gallery and you received an email from a 20-year-old student saying he had discovered a Rembrandt,” Buchakjian said. “You would not even reply!””

Since my first encounter with *Hercules and Omphale*, I never managed to see the work properly. The large canvas with dark tones was hanged opposite a window, so that wherever the eye would be positioned, some parts would be neat while others would be invisible due to reflections. This installation is an attempt to visually recollect the injured yet alive *Hercules and Omphale*. It is composed of 25 close ups printed on scale 1/1 and assembled on their precise positions. It is widely incoherent due to the variations of tonalities and perspectives of the photographs. It is moreover incomplete. These 25 closeups are the only parts for which I could produce readable images. What remains remained hitherto unknown until the painting was installed under appropriate light in the Getty Conservation. Therefore, in some way, I lost, in my turn, Artemisia, as it became in other hands.

Gregory Buchakjian, 4th of November, 2022

Appendix: list of publications of Hercules and Omphale

1. Articles from the 4th of August 2020 to the Getty Museum press release:

[Apollo Magazine, October 2020](#)
[Hyperallergic, 9 June 2021](#)
[Artnet, 10 June 2021](#)
[Exibart, 11 June 2021](#)
[Gazette Drouot, 14 June 2021](#)
[Le Quotidien de l'Art, 22 June 2021](#)
[Sanatatak, 22 June 2021](#)
[Connaissance des Arts, 23 June 2021](#)
[Frankfurter Allgemeine, 28 June 2021](#)
[Talivera, 8 July 2021](#)
[Beaux-Arts Magazine, August 2021](#)
[AWA Magazine, Summer 2021](#)
[De Volksrant, 9 September 2021](#)
[Art. Das Kunstmagazin, October 2021](#)
[La Libre Belgique, 14 December 2021](#)
[Bazar, 7 January 2022](#)
[Il Gioranale, 29 June 2022](#)

2. Medici Archive Project Conference

[Medici Archive Project, 20 April 2021](#)

3. Articles consecutive to the Getty Museum press release:

[Getty Museum, 25 October 2022](#)
[The New York Times, 25 October 2022](#)
[Kermes Restauero, 25 October 2022](#)
[The Art Newspaper, 26 October 2022](#)
[The Times, 26 October 2022](#)
[Hyperallergic, 26 October 2022](#)
[Ansa, 26 October 2022](#)
[ArtTribune, 26 October 2022](#)
[Clarin, 26 October 2022](#)
[UOL Noticias, 26 October 2022](#)
[Local Today California, 26 October 2022](#)
[ArtNews, 26 October 2022](#)
[USA Art News, 26 October 2022](#)
[Gazette Drouot, 26 October 2022](#)
[La Repubblica, 27 October 2022](#)
[Al Mayadeen, 27 October 2022](#)
[Terra Brazil, 27 October 2022](#)
[Estadao, 27 October 2022](#)
[GreenMe, 27 October 2022](#)

[Artnet, 28 October 2022](#)
[Il Giornale dell'Arte, 28 October 2022](#)
[Britannica, 28 October 2022](#)
[Megaphone News, 28 October 2022](#)
[Finestre Sull'Arte, 28 October 2022](#)
[Daily Times Pakistan, 28 October 2022](#)
[Mondafrique, 28 October 2022](#)
[MMC RTV Slovenija, 28 October 2022](#)
[The 961, 29 October 2022](#)
[La Razon, 29 October 2022](#)
[CVV News, 29 October 2022](#)
[Jordan News, 30 October 2022](#)
[Stern, 1 November 2022](#)
[Widewalls, 1 November 2022](#)
[El Espectador, 2 November 2022](#)
[Ars, 3 November 2022](#)
[Sothebys, 3 November 2022](#)
[Magazine Bilan, 3 November 2022](#)
[Beverly Press, 3 November 2022](#)
[Beaux-Arts Magazine, 4 November 2022](#)
[The Week United Kingdom, 5 November 2022](#)
[Bebeez, 6 November 2022](#)
[Le Figaro, 7 November 2022](#)
[Toute la culture, 9 November 2022](#)
[Arts in the City, 9 November 2022](#)
[L'Orient-Le Jour, 14 November 2022](#)
[The Art Insider, 14 November 2022](#)

4. Books and exhibition catalogues

[Le signore dell'arte. Storie di donne tra '500 e '600 exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Reale, Milan, 2021](#)
[How will it end exhibition catalogue, Villa Empain, Brussels in collaboration with Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2021](#)
[Maddalena. Il mistero e l'immagine, Musei San Domenico Forlì, 2022](#)