

Lucretia Through Art History

Whether during the Renaissance or the eighteenth century, artists and patrons strove to define and emulate Roman virtues through the representations of classical history. This task of borrowing, questioning, and repurposing Roman identity was particularly common among European art academies working within the genres of history and portrait painting.¹ For such works depicting Roman history, Livy's accounts in the *Ab Urbe Condita* have been important to generations of artists, as well as their wealthy and elite patrons.

What makes Livy's narrative especially appealing to those interested in Roman history are his portraits of individuals as examples of Roman virtues and qualities in answering the overarching question of what makes a Roman "Roman."² His style and focus not only offer a more personal and intimate study of history, relating to certain ubiquitous human tendencies, but also provide a detailed source ripe with possibilities for later artists to draw from and expand upon, even to relate to their own current moment. Along with the Horatii,

¹ History painting is defined as painting that draws its subject from classical, mythological, and biblical accounts. These artworks are dynamic, depicting energetic movements while representing a narrative of a significant event, rather than a specific and static moment, such as still life or landscape painting. Usually a group of figures interact with each other, while showing several temporal moments in narrative succession within one scene or one crucial moment with several components. Portraiture, though not always included in the genre of history painting, as it has a narrower focus and does not allow for as much visual storytelling, is also popular depict historical figures or pivotal moments focusing on one figure.

² R. M. Ogilvie, "Livy," Chapter in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, edited by E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen, 458–66, *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 459.

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Virginia, and the Sabine women, the Rape of Lucretia (*Ab Urbe Condita* 1.57-60) has been a frequent choice for artists over time, each painter adapting the story for their particular narrative across various styles and movements. The story of Lucretia has remained especially relevant through Livy's use of character types and his inquiry into what characterizes a Roman.

Lucretia's story is not just one of rape, but also chastity, Republican liberty, and morality. As artists chose to highlight specific aspects of her story and characteristics, they offered conflicting interpretations of her actions.³ The paintings to be examined in this paper depict three pivotal moments in Livy's narrative. First is the rape (i.e. the direct cause of Lucretia's death) as shown in Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia* (oil on canvas, 1578-80). Second is the suicide (i.e. the moment of her death) in Artemisia Gentileschi's *Lucretia* (oil on canvas, 1627). Finally, we will look at the funeral (i.e. the aftermath of her death, when Brutus swears the oath to dismantle the monarchy) as represented in Gavin Hamilton's *The Death of Lucretia* (oil on canvas, 1763-67) (figures 1-3). This paper will conclude with an analysis of the Renaissance master Botticelli's rendition, *The Story of Lucretia* (tempera on panel, c. 1500), which bookends the other paintings by distilling the multiple scenes into a coherent image with temporal progression rather than one scene alone (figure 4). As demonstrated by these examples created in the centuries since Livy's original telling, visual

³ Sabrina DeTurk, "Illicit arousal: the erotic subtext of Tintoretto's Tarquin and Lucretia," *Aurora, The Journal of the History of Art* 2 (2001): 1. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed December 8, 2024). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A166945181/AONE?u=nysl_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid=6b9e2ec2.

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representations of Lucretia's story give insight not only into how later periods defined and sought to emulate Roman cultural values, but also how they reinterpreted those virtues for their own moment in history. Aside from stylistic changes, artists have also differed in their faithfulness to Livy's original in pursuing their own narrative.

Tintoretto's *Tarquin and Lucretia: The Rape*

Tintoretto's Renaissance-era painting, *Tarquin and Lucretia* (oil on canvas, 1578-80), depicts Tarquin and Lucretia as she struggles to get away from him in a chaotic and diagonal composition. Her bedding and canopy crashes around them, as he grabs her by her clothing, ripping it to shreds barely covering her nude body. Her breasts are exposed as she turns from the viewer to conceal herself while simultaneously calling attention to her violated nudity. Her pearls have broken and fallen to the floor as the carved bed posts have come crashing down, including a toppled sculpture in the bottom left corner. The dagger which Tarquin threatened her with is on the floor pointing straight towards her, leaning on a step as she tries to move away, perhaps a foreshadowing of what's to come.

As a symbol of rape and sexual penetration, this dagger also visually represents her violation. In addition to indicating what's to come, the scattered objects serve to reinforce the chaos and disarray of the event. Tarquin bends forward grasping at Lucretia, his body contorted as a sign of his evil and corruption. The composition is dark, giving a sense of danger and crime, which simultaneously makes Lucretia the primary focus, as her pale figure stands out against the shadowy background, which makes use of chiaroscuro. While distortion and dramatic compositions are typical for the artist, here they

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are employed to capture the most violent part of the story.⁴ Livy's telling of the assault is nowhere near as descriptive as Tintoretto's painting. Indeed, as a visual form of storytelling it needs to be compelling in setting, detail, and action to resonate with viewers and carry the full effect of such a violent scene. The artist also anachronistically places the two in a Renaissance interior, not a Roman one, bringing the rape to his present.

Tintoretto also differs in the specifics of the narrative. In the painting, there is more violence captured, as Livy does not go into detail about Lucretia's actions other than her refusal. Immediately after Tarquin wakes Lucretia, in *Ab Urbe Condita*, Livy focuses on Tarquin's words: "Since his conquering lust overtook her resolved chastity by fear and force, then arrogant Tarquin went off having assaulted the woman's honor."⁵ Tintoretto, meanwhile, emphasizes Lucretia's movement and struggle to get away from her assailant. Tintoretto's placement of the richly-colored, fallen drapery, the sheer fabric covering Lucretia, and overall crowded and chaotic composition make the scene feel illicitly erotic.⁶ Paired with the artist's dramatic use of chiaroscuro, the figures, particularly that of Lucretia, immediately stand out to the viewer as their bodies reflect the light captured in the artist's brushstrokes. This effect of the light feels as if a spotlight is shining on the figures, placing the

⁴ "Tarquin and Lucretia Catalog Entry," *Art Institute of Chicago*, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/64920/tarquin-and-lucretia>; "Jacopo Tintoretto," *The National Gallery of Art*, accessed June 9, 2026, <https://www.nga.gov/artists/1929-jacopo-tintoretto>.

⁵ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.58: *Quo terrore cum vicisset obstinatam pudicitiam velut vi victrix libido, profectusque inde Tarquinius ferox expugnato decore muliebri esset*. All translations are my own.

⁶ DeTurk, "Illicit arousal."

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secluded, heinous scene on full display for the viewer to steal a glance.⁷ Lucretia's smooth, delicate, and luminous body seemingly invite the viewer to continue to gaze, which runs counterintuitive to the purpose of Livy's telling. Rather than draw attention away from the bodily reality and graphic scene of sexual crime, as Livy does, Tintoretto directly confronts the viewer with the sight of it. Tarquin's sinewy and shadowed form contradicts that of Lucretia, which heightens the tension of the painting. Lucretia's exposed breasts and general openness of her body, completely turned towards the viewer, suggest that she is open to the gaze of the viewer, as well as the advances of Tarquin, despite the chaos of the painting and struggle as she tries to get away. By leaving Lucretia so exposed, Tintoretto not only diverges from Livy's account, but also the depictions of his contemporaries, who generally chose to heavily drape Lucretia and depict the moment of her suicide rather than her rape, which is more in line with the original literature by focusing on her sacrifice.⁸ Rather, through his erotic representation, Tintoretto opposes Livy's emphasis on chastity and women's morality and creates a counter narrative which forces the viewer to engage more directly in the crime itself rather than be witness to her moral sacrifice.

Gentileschi's *Lucretia*: The Suicide

Artemisia Gentileschi, on the other hand, captures the moment of Lucretia's death in an intimate portrait, *Lucretia* (oil on canvas, 1627). It is a snapshot moments before the suicide, underscoring her virtue and sacrifice, as Livy frames it in *Ab*

⁷ DeTurk, "Illicit arousal."

⁸ DeTurk, "Illicit arousal."

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Urbe Condita, in addition to incorporating her pain and grief. Unlike Tintoretto's erotic and sexually open Lucretia, Gentileschi's is elegant, sophisticated, and portrayed with empathy — a unique lens offered by a female artist. The artist is known for painting *donne forte* (strong women) from classical and biblical history, and has a particular interest in Lucretia, having painted her at least four times.⁹ All but one of Gentileschi's extant depictions of Lucretia show her alone.¹⁰ Her 1627 version is dramatic, using a strong contrast of light and dark to create a sense of grief, anguish, and impending death, similar to Livy's narrative:

"Lucretia, afflicted by such great evil, sent a messenger to both her father at Rome and to her husband at Ardea, so that they each come with a loyal friend; thus it was necessary to hasten and act; a horrible deed had taken place...They found Lucretia sitting in her room overwhelmed by grief."¹¹

In typical Italian Baroque fashion of dynamic, contorted, and dramatic compositions, Gentileschi's Lucretia twists backwards as she raises the dagger towards her chest. She is alone in an undefined space pressed against a dark, shadowy background. Her breasts are bare and she wears a thin shawl to cover her arms to emphasize what she is about to do. At the same time, the rest of her body is covered and unavailable to the viewer. Her expression is one of anguish, suffering, and yet determination, as her eyes gaze upwards and the dagger, firmly grasped in her hand, is inches from her chest. She is mere

⁹ "Lucretia Catalog Entry," *The Getty Museum*, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/109Q8G>.

¹⁰ "Lucretia Catalog Entry," *The Getty Museum*.

¹¹ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.58: *Lucretia maesta tanto malo nuntium Romam eundem ad patrem Ardeamque ad virum mittit, ut cum singulis fidelibus amicis veniant; ita facto maturatoque opus esse; rem atrocem incidisse...Lucretiam sedentem maestam in cubiculo inveniunt.*

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moments away from death with no sense of turning back. Gentileschi strays from Livy's narrative by not including any of the male witnesses she summoned, leaving Lucretia alone in the empty picture plane as the sole focus. She eliminates everything else from the composition to make Lucretia the center of attention in this desperate, anguished moment to highlight her suffering and sacrifice. The narrative will continue and the monarchy will be overthrown, sworn on her blood, but that is not Gentileschi's interest for this painting. This is not an image about Roman political history, but rather an image of a woman who has suffered at the hands of a corrupted monarchy and has been failed by the men around her, evidenced by their absence from the image.¹²

Gentileschi's interest in such women of history, particularly those who are victims of sexual violence and have reacted against it — including her representations of *Susanna and the Elders* and *Judith and Holofernes*, both of which strayed from artistic precedent in her time — stems both from her artistic persona as a female artist working in a predominately male field and from her personal experience of being raped by one of her mentors as a young woman.¹³ For Gentileschi, Lucretia becomes a symbol of female strength and resolve whose story warrants an emotionally complex painting centered on her. While differing in narrative details, Gentileschi's painting closely aligns with Lucretia's morality, chastity, and resolve in

¹² Jesse Locker, "Lucretia (Artemisia Gentileschi)," *The Matthiesen Gallery*, last updated 2021, accessed December 8, 2024, http://matthiesengallery.com/work_of_art/lucretia-3.

¹³ Caroline Goldstein, "The Getty Museum Just Acquired the Recently Rediscovered Artemisia Gentileschi Painting That Set a New Record at Auction," *Artnet*, last updated March 30, 2021, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artemisia-gentileschi-acquisition-1955765>.

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Livy's writing. The artist even goes further to grant Lucretia more agency and significance alone by only showing her in the immediate moment before her death. This autonomy serves to heighten the tension and act of purification, transforming it into one of vengeance. Also, by positioning Lucretia in the moment immediately before her death, as her dagger hovers above her breast, Gentileschi shows Lucretia preserving her honor and emphasizing her traditional virtues, while also granting her the responsibility for bringing down the Tarquins by a single stroke in a more active moment.¹⁴

Gavin Hamilton's *Death of Lucretia*: The Funeral

Gavin Hamilton, an avid archaeologist and antiquarian working in Rome, had a particular interest in dramatic and emotionally compelling scenes from classical history and mythology. He often chose to focus on chaste and upright women, including Agrippina the Elder and Andromache.¹⁵ By depicting moral characters of antiquity, Hamilton, in the Neo-classical spirit, urges his audience to follow in their example and live by the virtues of the ideal past. Hamilton's representation of Lucretia, *Death of Lucretia* (oil on canvas, 1763-7), picks up where Gentileschi left off, capturing the moment immediately following Lucretia's death as Brutus swears the oath on the still-bloodied dagger. Despite the title citing her death as the primary subject, Hamilton shifts the focus away from Lucretia and towards

¹⁴ Locker, "Lucretia (Artemisia Gentileschi)."

¹⁵ "Gavin Hamilton," National Galleries Scotland. See also Robert Chambers, "Gavin Hamilton," in *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1853-5), 574.

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Brutus. Standing in the center of the composition raising the dagger clutched in his hand, Brutus swears the oath, lending the painting an alternative name: *The Oath of Brutus*.¹⁶

Lucretia, in her dying moments, the wound visible on her pale skin as her blood covers the ground before her, clutches Brutus's clothing. Her maid is in the background as she looks on with horror at the scene before her. Lucretia's husband, Collatinus, props up her corpse as he covers his face in grief. Her father, Lucretius, and Valerius Publicola stand beside Brutus, taking up the oath to overthrow the corrupted monarchy. Hamilton's rendering is faithful to Livy in both action and dress, which is standard for late eighteenth-century academic history painting.¹⁷ Hamilton captures simultaneously the agony of Lucretia's death, the pain and grief of Collatinus and her father at the loss of Lucretia, and the determination of Brutus. With Lucretia's blood on the ground before them, they have resolved to avenge her and overthrow the current government. Weapons lie about: the dagger in Brutus' hand, its sheath still at Lucretia's feet; a spear cast to the floor behind the main action, only noticeable by a reflective glint; and a sword still in its sheath, which Valerius Publicola extends forward, indicating the start of the rebellion. The scattered instruments, including a helmet behind Brutus, represent not only what has happened, but also foreshadow the action these men will take. Lucretia's hand grasping at Brutus' toga and her dying gaze pointed towards the dagger indicate the significance of this moment and represent how she is relying upon Brutus to

¹⁶ "Gavin Hamilton," National Galleries Scotland, accessed April 2, 2025, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/artists/gavin-hamilton>.

¹⁷ "History Painting," National Galleries Scotland.

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carry out her dying wish: to avenge her and not suffer anyone of Tarquin's line to rule. There is tension and anticipation in the painting as it depicts the beginning of the rebellion, following Livy's narrative while also adding more visual details and symbols. Unlike the previous examples, which feel more intimate and give the impression that the viewer is witnessing the historic moment unfold before them, Hamilton's compressed composition with little spatial recession and dramatic poses makes the figures feel as if they are instead acting out the tragic scene in a staged environment.¹⁸ His limited color palette and architectural arrangement offers a gravity to the scene which serves to fully illustrate the moral weight of this moment as it is described by Livy.

Hamilton's painting also differs from the previous two in that his aims to convey the same virtues of honor, morality, and righteousness as Livy's description in *Ab Urbe Condita*, keeping the details distinctly Roman and closely following the narrative in painting the scene. He only adds certain details to make the image more visually compelling. Along with other Neoclassicists at the end of the eighteenth century, Hamilton embraced a revival of the ideal classical woman — who possesses the virtues of honor, loyalty, and intelligence — and rejected the previous Rococo woman's hyper-feminine and decadent style.¹⁹ Unlike Tintoretto's erotic depiction or Gentileschi's tragic portrait,

¹⁸ Spatial recession is the illusion of depth in a two-dimensional work which places the subject closer or further from the viewer. In Hamilton's painting, the figures appear to be in the foreground closer to the viewer and the room does not extend far into the background.

¹⁹ Chris Johnson, "The Allegorical Figure of Painting," Augustana College, last updated 2007, accessed April 5, 2025, <http://www.augustana.net/academics/arhistory/AGES/pages/055.html>.

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Hamilton uses the figure of Lucretia to moralize his audience and call back to a more virtuous and idealized past.

Botticelli's *The Story of Lucretia*: A Visual Summary

The three paintings discussed to this point have highlighted a specific narrative moment within Livy's work, relying upon the viewer to be familiar with the entire story to contextualize each scene. Florentine Renaissance painter Botticelli's *The Story of Lucretia* (tempera on panel, c. 1500), on the other hand, serves as an overview, not only of the story itself, but also of what various artists have chosen to do with it. Like Hamilton, the Renaissance master primarily focuses on Brutus' oath, and in two arched rooms to either side, he frames the two early moments of her rape and suicide. He distills them to a key moment with few figures so as not to draw away from the center action.

However, rather than the private setting of Hamilton's, Botticelli depicts a public Roman built environment, though still with Tintoretto's anachronistic Renaissance clothing and architectural details. At the center is Lucretia's body, the knife still in her breast, with Brutus above her, holding his own sword, which strays from Livy's narrative. Here, Botticelli transforms her body into a symbol of liberty — a frequent theme in Renaissance Florentine art.²⁰ Florentine artists often used historical and mythological figures to create self-icons of liberty and autonomy, such as the biblical king David, who stands on the column above Brutus and Lucretia in *The Story of Lucretia*. Florence had a rivalry with both Milan and Naples, particularly

²⁰ "The Story of Lucretia Catalog Entry," *The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum*, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/collection/10986>.

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in terms of trade and economy. In response to this tension, wealthy, aristocratic families strived to prove themselves worthy of political power through the symbolism of the art they commissioned.²¹ In this painting, Botticelli takes the narrative and applies it to his present to appease his patrons — *The Story of Lucretia*, along with *The Story of Verginia*, was commissioned by the Vespucci family, wealthy Florentines who sought to assert their own claims to power and influence, as well as highlight their knowledge of classical history. Lucretia, paired with the marble statue of David on the column and the bronze friezes and reliefs of famous scenes of triumph in the background (including accounts from Herodotus of the Persian Wars), becomes a sign of Florentine power. It is reissued as a call to action for a new political movement to overtake current corrupted states; namely, Florence's political rivals.²² Botticelli anachronistically blends clothing and symbols into the narrative to make it applicable for his audience.

In addition to celebrating the virtues Livy expresses as Hamilton did in his painting, Botticelli embraces the political, even revolutionary, aspect of Lucretia's narrative and brings it to the present day. In addition to the political implications tied to the Florentine family, the Vespucci also commissioned *The Story of Lucretia* as a decoration for a wedding in their palace. This nuptial context places the piece within the tradition of marriage gift paintings, which often were intended for young

²¹ Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Heather Graham, "Why commission artwork during the renaissance?," in *Smarthistory*, April 24, 2020, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://smarthistory.org/renaissance-patrons/>.

²² Lloyd Schwartz, "Botticelli Spun Masterful Scenes of Historical Complexity," *wbur*, last updated February 16, 2019, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://www.wbur.org/news/2019/02/13/botticelli-heroes-heroes-gardner-review>.

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brides to instill in them what it meant to be a good wife. Botticelli's *Primavera* is thought to serve a similar purpose by showing the kidnapping of the nymph Chloris and her transformation into the happy goddess Flora through marriage. Botticelli's Lucretia, in addition to being a political emblem, follows in Livy's framework as a model for uxorial virtues and morality:

"She said, 'You will have seen to what is owed to him. Although I absolve myself of sin, I do not free myself from punishment, lest any shameful woman shall live from now on by the example of Lucretia.'"²³

Despite her pagan origin and unchristian death by suicide, through the medieval period and Renaissance Lucretia was celebrated as a model wife who was deeply devoted to her husband and aligned her internal emotions of love and dedication with her external actions to uphold her chastity and virtue.²⁴

Livy and his account of Lucretia's story in the *Ab Urbe Condita* has inspired generations of artists across movements, each one choosing to highlight particular aspects of the story to make them more relevant to their own time and intentions. From Tintoretto's eroticized rendition to Botticelli's political messaging, the story of Lucretia has remained a powerful image to portray varying aspects of history, culture, and values. The story of a virtuous wife has continuously been imagined and reimagined, transforming her into a symbol of morality,

²³ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.58: "Vos" inquit "uideritis quid illi debeatur: ego me etsi peccato absolvo, supplicio non libero; nec ulla deinde impudica Lucretiae exemplo vivet."

²⁴ Lynn Shutters, "Marital Affection and the Medieval Lucretia," *MFF* 45 no. 1, 2009: 62-84, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1811&context=mff>.

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women's sacrifice, liberty, and the fight for autonomy against a corrupt authority. Such paintings prove that Livy's writings remain relevant over the centuries to a wide array of audiences.

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Figure 1: Tintoretto. *Tarquin and Lucretia*. 1578-80. Oil on canvas, 175 × 151.5 cm (68 7/8 × 59 5/8 in.). Chicago, Art Institute Purchase Fund.
<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/64920/tarquin-and-lucretia>.



Figure 2: Gentileschi, Artemisia. *Lucretia*. 1627. Oil on canvas, 92.9 × 72.7 cm (36 9/16 × 28 5/8 in.). Los Angeles, The Getty Museum.
<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/109Q8G>.



Figure 3: Hamilton, Gavin. *The Death of Lucretia*. 1763-67. Oil on canvas, 213.4 × 264.2 cm (84 × 104 in.). New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. <https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms:810>.



Figure 4: Botticelli, Sandro. *The Story of Lucretia*. c. 1500. Tempera and oil on panel, 83.8 x 176.8 cm (33 x 69 5/8 in.). Boston, The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/experience/collection/10986>.

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