



## Grieving Queen or Selfless Noblewoman?

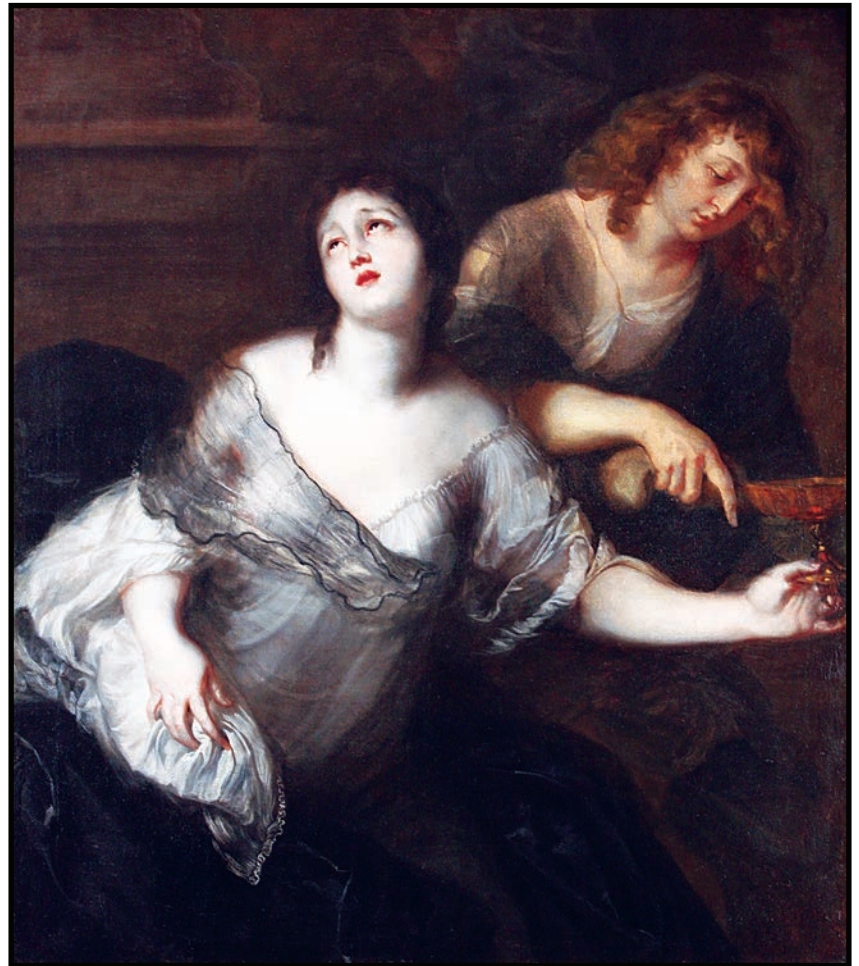
by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

*“The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”*  
—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Philosophy of Composition*, 1846

Poe summed it well: we love a tragic heroine. But we were hardly the first, and Greek and Roman literature abounds in doomed queens, princesses, and assorted noblewomen. By the Baroque period of the seventeenth century, the tragic heroine of classical antiquity was a well-established favorite subject of European artists, and their artistic output included a slew of Cleopatras, Lucretias, Artemisias, Sophonisbas, and Didos. The Museum’s collection has one such representation by Matthäus Merian the Younger, the subject long identified as Sophonisba, the Carthaginian noblewoman who drank poison rather than be taken captive by the Romans during the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE). But is the subject really Sophonisba?

Roman authors could not say enough about the virtues of Sophonisba. Young, beautiful, and self-sacrificing, she was the epitome of what Roman men admired in women, even though she was ultimately deemed a Roman enemy. While those

sources conflict in details about Sophonisba, most agree on an ill-starred love triangle. Sophonisba was first betrothed to Masinissa, king of the eastern Numidians. But Carthage decided that Syphax, king of the western Numidians, would be a better ally for them, and thus a better husband for Sophonisba. She dutifully married Syphax but he was defeated by the Romans, leading to the capture



Matthäus Merian the Younger (Swiss, 1621–1687)

*Sophonisba* or *Artemisia*, 1647

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Olden (66.348)

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# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE



Anonymous  
[Bristol Museum and Art Gallery \(Bristol\)](#).

of his wife. Unknown to Sophonisba, Masinissa, her true love, had become a Roman ally, and she suddenly fell into his hands after all. Fairy-tale ending? Not exactly. Roman leader Scipio did not trust Sophonisba and declared her an enemy of the state whose fate would be enslavement. Masinissa could not bear this turn of events so he secretly arranged for his love to drink poison. She allegedly took the lethal draught with the requisite stoic reserve befitting her class.

Queen Artemisia II of Karia (Asia Minor) was the wife and sister of Mausolus, king of Karia (r. 377–353 BCE). When Mausolus died, Artemisia ruled Karia alone for two additional years until her own death. Some of the Karian subjects objected to the rule of a woman, but Artemisia showed herself to be both formidable and competent. She is most remembered, however, for her extravagant and dramatic grief at the death of her brother-husband, overseeing the construction of a mammoth tomb for him at the coastal city of Halikarnassos (modern Bodrum). Even the Greeks, notoriously disdainful of foreigners, had to concede that this fifteen-

story megalomaniacal marble pile was worthy of their list of Seven Wonders. The sorry remains of the great tomb of Mausolus are such that one can step over most of it today, but its memory survives in “mausoleum,” the generic word for fancy above-the-ground tombs. Tomb aside, Artemisia’s grief took an even more eccentric turn. She is said to have drunk part of her husband’s cremated remains dissolved in wine, thus becoming his *living* tomb. In his *On Famous Women*, Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) proclaimed her an example of the “purest and rarest kind of love” (indeed!). Moreover, she had caught the attention of Valerius Maximus (1<sup>st</sup> century CE) who included her in his *Nine Books of*

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[Rembrandt. Prado \(Madrid\).](#)

of the day are evident in his dramatic composition in which the figures form an emphatic diagonal against a dark ground. The central figure, visibly grief-struck, turns her brimming eyes heavenward as she takes the fatal cup. The painting's components could fit either the story of Sophonisba or Artemisia. But a 2009 Spanish publication\* on another Merian painting revealed two important records regarding his work: 1) the art collection of Merian's son, Johann, was sold in Frankfurt in 1717, and among the contents was a painting by his father identified as "Arthemisia," and 2) Merian's teacher, Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688), praised a painting by Merian of Artemisia in an Augsburg collection. It seems likely that one of these citations must refer to the painting now in Missouri. But the Museum has not been alone in questioning the identity of its dying heroines. The subject of a painting by Rembrandt in the Prado has long been questioned. Others, including one in Bristol, have similarly ambiguous subjects. The Merian painting will be on exhibit at the Museum of Art and Archaeology in the *Art of Death* exhibition through October 18<sup>th</sup>. ■

*Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, which was translated into Dutch in 1614. Boccaccio was an obvious sourcebook for artists while the characters of classical antiquity were a given. A new translation of an ancient source made them all the more available. The incestuous and obsessive love of Artemisia was just too titillating for artists to resist.

Matthäus Merian the Younger is not a particularly well-remembered name today but he was a competent artist in his day. The son of an artist (MM the Elder), the younger Merian worked as an engraver, luxury goods importer, and painter. Regarding the latter, he mostly produced portraits for the wealthy, but a few other paintings are known, including the Museum's example. His knowledge of the trends

\* J. Sanzsalazar, "Matthäus Merian el Joven, Pintor en el Taller de Van Dyck: A Propósito de un Lienzo con *Vertumno y Pomona* Identificado," *Archivo Español de Arte* 82 (2009) 259–272.