

Masterpiece of women's art finds modest home in rural Danish gallery

Julia Buckley

The queen of Italian baroque, who painted for kings and cardinals, Artemisia Gentileschi has long been an artist whose works are prized by gallery owners.

But thanks to a rise in galleries trying to increase the number of female artists in their collections, her work is more sought-after than ever.

Now, joining the list of owners of her works – from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to London's National Gallery – is a small gallery in rural Denmark.

Last weekend the Nivaagaard Collection, located in a seaside village 40 minutes north of Copenhagen, unveiled its latest acquisition, Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders*. Its director, Andrea Rygg Karberg, beat dozens of

international galleries this summer when she bought the 2m-high painting for an undisclosed sum, and called its unveiling "the happiest moment".

In doing so, Rygg Karberg established her museum as a leading gallery for women's art of the Renaissance and baroque periods.

The painting, which depicts a young woman being harassed by two lecherous men as she bathes, now hangs alongside works by Sofonisba Anguissola, the Renaissance artist who influenced Caravaggio, her sister, Europa Anguissola, and the Flemish still-life maestro Catharina Ykens II.

With works on display by four women who lived before the 18th century, the acquisition puts the Nivaagaard – a museum of just three main rooms and 261

paintings – ahead of the Louvre, whose online catalogue names three female painters who lived before the 1700s in its database of about 500,000 artworks.

Nivaagaard has also leapfrogged SMK, the National Gallery of Denmark, which has three.

It is on a par with the Prado and London's National Gallery, on four each. While the other museums confirmed their figures, the Louvre refused to follow suit. The museum has 200 female artists in its collection and about 1,200 men.

Europe's post-pandemic art world has a renewed interest in works by women. Since 2020, Gentileschi retrospectives have been held in Naples, Paris and at the National Gallery, while Rygg Karberg staged a Sofonisba Anguissola show at the

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Nivaagaard's new acquisition: *Susanna and the Elders* by the Italian baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi

Nivaagaard in 2022, and the National Gallery of Ireland held a major exhibition on the Bolognese painter Lavinia Fontana in 2023.

Yet when it comes to permanent collections, major galleries remain slow on the uptake. The feminist campaigners the Guerrilla Girls have been protesting since 1985 about the low acquisition rates of women's art; a 2019 report found that only 2 per cent of global art auction spending was on works by women. The former director of Florence's Uffizi Galleries, Eike Schmidt, made a hobby out of hauling women's works out of storage, but new acquisitions eluded him.

Rygg Karberg's acquisition is the latest milestone in her goal to display at least one work by a woman in each of the Nivaagaard's three

specialist areas: the Italian Renaissance, the Dutch Golden Age and 19th-century Danish painting.

She joined the gallery as director in 2017, when the gallery had just one confirmed painting by a woman.

Sofonisba Anguissola's *Family Portrait* was acquired by the collection's founder, Johannes Hage, in 1873, when it was believed to be by an anonymous male painter.

Rygg Karberg says she is not making a statement but rebalancing art history.

"Female painters were always there but slipped from history along the way, mostly in the 19th century," she said. "We lost half of history. Sofonisba and Artemisia were really famous in their own time but they were only rediscovered in the 1970s."

Nivaagaard was first to register interest in the

Gentileschi, which had been part of a private collection. It was sold in New York by the dealer Nicholas Hall, who had visited the museum on holiday two years earlier. He described the Nivaagaard as "a small museum but with a room of surprisingly impressive European old master paintings".

Susanna and the Elders was a subject Gentileschi explored repeatedly, and seven of her paintings of the subject survive. The Old Testament tale of a woman tried for adultery when she refused to be blackmailed into sex by two men had clear parallels with Gentileschi's own rape trial – which, like the biblical heroine, she won. "It's really personal to her," said Rygg Karberg of the topic. "Some of her early versions are more violent. This is more dignified."