The National Gallery's recent acquisition of Artemisia Gentileschi's Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria (Fig. 1) takes the number of works by female artists in the permanent collection to twenty-one. Artists represented at the National Gallery include Henriette Browne, Berthe Morisot, Rachel Ruysch, Rosa Bonheur, Catharina van Hemessen, Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun, Judith Leyster, Rosalba Carriera, Marie Blancour, Vivien Blackett, Madeleine Strindberg, Maggi Hambling, and Paula Rego.

Fig. 1: Artemisia Gentileschi, Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c 1615-17, oil on canvas, 71.4 x 69 cm. [c] National Gallery, London. [see PDF for image]

In this interview at the National Gallery, Susanna Avery-Quash (Senior Research Curator in the History of Collecting) asks Letizia Treves (The James and Sarah Sassoon Curator of Later Italian, Spanish, and French 17th-Century Paintings) and Francesca Whitlum-Cooper (The Myojin-Nadar Associate Curator of Paintings 1600-1800) about the experiences of women artists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and how their work was received during their lifetimes and later.

SAQ:
What was it like to be a woman artist in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and how exceptional was it?

LT:
Germaine Greer famously described Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) as 'the magnificent exception'. Although it was certainly unusual for women in seventeenth-century Italy to become professional artists (as opposed to amateurs), Artemisia wasn't alone in doing so - nor was she the first. Famous precedents include Sofonisba Anguissola (1530-1625), who specialized in portraiture (and self-portraits); Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), who gained notable success painting portraits and small paintings on copper; and Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665), whose period of activity overlaps with Artemisia's (though her life was cut short in her twenties), who set up the first school of painting for women. What sets Artemisia apart is that she didn't limit herself to portraiture and still life, but tackled the same biblical and historical subjects as her male contemporaries. It's fair to say that women who became professional painters rarely attained the same fame and reputation as men during their own lifetimes, but Artemisia is an exception in this regard.

FWC:
Across Europe, the eighteenth century saw more women working as professional artists, but the fact that the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in Paris felt the need to limit the number of women who could hold membership at any one time to just four tells you quite a lot about the anxieties these women artists provoked! Even when they were awarded membership to the Académie royale, they received none of the privileges their male counterparts enjoyed, such as studio space within the Louvre or access to life drawing classes. Nevertheless, that didn't stop artists such as Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) or Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749-1803) becoming extremely successful. They both worked as portraitists - the gallery owns Vigée-Lebrun's Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat (NG1653) (Fig. 2) - but there were still life painters too, such as Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744-1818) in France or Mary Moser (1744-1819) in England. But stereotypes about women artists being less...