

Giulia Lama's *Saturn Devouring His Child*: Mysterious Fatherly Love*

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Set against the cultural and historical backdrop of 18th-century Venice, Giulia Elisabetta Lama's (1681-1747) remarkable paintings reveal intriguing connections to mythology and science. Lama's notable depiction of *Saturn Devouring His Child*, painted in oils in 1729 and now in a private collection, draws significant attention.

Keywords: Giulia Lama, Saturn, mythology, 18th-century art, Venice, heartless subjects, fatherly love

... If the luck stars are ready
To your bidding, always cruel fate
Turns its face far away from you ...
Giulia Lama's *Poems*¹ (Cheney, 2017, p. 252)

Saturn Devouring His Child

Giulia Lama's iconographic and iconological interpretation of her brutal subjects continues to generate significant intrigue, particularly *Saturn Devouring His Child*, 1729, oil on canvas, currently in a private collection (Figure 1) (Teufel, 2022, pp. 252-253).² Within Venice's cultural and historical context during this period, this fascinating painting evokes intriguing mythological and scientific correlations.

The distinguished Venetian painter Giulia Elisabetta Lama (1681-1747) exhibited exceptional drawing and painting skills, along with scientific interests (Cheney, 2017; Gietz, 2024; Teufel, 2022; Klingebiel, 2009; Taguchi Yayoi, 2002; Banta, Greist, & Kutasz Christensen, 2024; Cooper, 2024; Niss, 2024).³ Lama was an amateur science enthusiast. As an artist of her era, she excelled in drawing, particularly representing the human

* **Acknowledgement:** I am grateful to Prof. Tina Bizzarro, Professor of Art History, Villanova University, PA, for her comments. Liana De Girolami Cheney, Ph.D., Professor (Emerita), University of Massachusetts (UMASS), Lowell, USA.

¹ Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Giulia Lama: A Luminous Painter and a Tenebrist Poet", *Artibus et Historiae*, 75 (2017), 225-252, Appendix Giulia Lama's Poems, p. 252.

² This painting was auctioned by Christie's in London on 8 July 2011 and is attributed to Giulia Lama, as this essay considers. The date of the painting ranges between 1729-1733. However, the literature presents conflicting interpretations. Some scholars attributed it to Paolo Paganì, while others assigned it to Giambattista Tiepolo. For further details, please refer to the relevant literature in <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5443554>. See also Tina Teufel, "Giulia Lama", diss. Salzburg University, Austria, 2022, pp. 252-253.

³ For archival and biographical literature see Cheney, "Giulia Lama", pp. 225-252; and recently Nora Gietz, "A Woman Artist in Eighteenth-Century Venice: New Details About Giulia Lama's Life (1681-1747)", *Artibus et Historiae*, 89 (2024), 225-246. Several dissertations provide new insights in Giulia Lama's art, e.g., Teufel, "Giulia Lama"; Josephine Klingebiel, *Der Aktmalerei der Giulia Lama* (Diss., Technische Universität Dresden, 2009), published Munich: GRIN, 2009; and Laurenda Taguchi Yayoi, "Giulia Lama: 'Io, donna, poetessa, e pittrice': Un nuovo confronto tra le opere pittoriche e i suoi disegni", Ca Foscari University, 2002. See also Andaleeb Badice Banta, Alexa Greist, and Theresa Kutasz Christensen, *Making Her Mark: A History of Women Artists in Europe, 1400-1800* (Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada: Goose Lane Edition); and Tracy E. Cooper, *Women Artists and Artisans in Venice and the Veneto, 1400-1750: Uncovering the Female Presence* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024), in particular Cleo Nisse, "Shining a Light on Giulia Lama's Painting Practice in the San Marziale Four Evangelists", pp. 213-234.

form. Her fascination with the male physique is vividly reflected in her numerous drawings in the Bergamo and Venice collections (Correr Museum) (Surian, 2018; Ruggeri, 1967; 1973).⁴ Upon observing her artwork, it is evident that she expressed her understanding of human anatomy through an artistic and distinctive approach to handling line, modeling form, the interplay of light effects (tenebrism technique), and the foreshortening of anatomical structure in her representations of nude male figures. These meticulous observations and adherence to naturalism indicate that she examined live models as subjects for her artistic endeavors. Unfortunately, female artists were neither supported at the Venetian Academy nor allowed to draw on its premises during this time. As a result, she ingeniously and persistently sought out ways to study actual nude male forms, such as at the Venetian Arsenal, where she could observe men work (Cheney, 2017, p. 230; Ruggeri, 1973, pp. 9-20).⁵



Figure 1. Giulia Lama, *Saturn Devouring His Child*, 1729-1733, oil on canvas. Private Collection. Public domain. Commons Wikimedia.

⁴ Vittoria Surian, Ed., *Giulia Lama: Nudi* (Venice: Mirano, 2018); Ugo Ruggeri, "Giulia Lama disegnatrice", *La Critica d'Arte*, 14 (May 1967), 49-59; Ugo Ruggeri, *Dipinti e Disegni di Giulia Lama* (Bergamo: Monumenta Bergomensia, 1973).

⁵ Cheney, "Giulia Lama", p. 230; Ruggeri, *Dipinti e disegni di Giulia Lama*, pp. 9-20.

The Venetian Arsenal attained historical significance in 1610 when the esteemed astronomer and humanist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who was amid his tenure teaching mathematics, engineering, and astronomy at the University of Padua, was invited as a consultant by the government of *La Serenissima* to assist in the reconstruction of the naval capabilities of the Venetian Republic (Davis, 1991/2007/2010).⁶ The primary objective was to restore and regulate the mass production shipyard and armories of the Venetian Arsenal. It has been asserted that during this period in Venice, Galileo utilized a rudimentary telescope to become the first scientist to observe Saturn; however, he was unable to determine the number of rings surrounding the planet (Seddon, 2021; Deiss & Nebel, 1998).⁷ Undoubtedly, Lama was aware of this historical event involving Galileo's presence in Venice, as well as this planetary historical occurrence.

In addition to her interest in human anatomy and scientific events, she was interested in mathematics through her tutor Padre Maffei, known as Padre Tomas [Tommaso] Maffei (Ruggeri, 1973, p. 120; Puricelli, 2002, p. 5).⁸ He was a scientist and theologian who admired and followed Galileo, as evidenced by his published treatise *On the Use of Mathematics in Theology, and Miscellaneous Matters Concerning the Universal Static Principle of Galileo and the Opinion of Descartes* (*P. Thomae Pii Maphei De usu Matheseos in Theologicis, & Diversa circa Principium Universale Staticum Galilaei, & Cartesii Sententia*), published in Venice in 1729 by the Cristoforo Zane Press.⁹ Her touring fueled these scientific interests; thus Lama had a significant connection and coincidence regarding her visual intellectual pursuits related to art and her knowledge of recent discoveries about the planetary system, particularly Saturn.

In ancient Roman and Greek mythological traditions, Saturn is the Roman counterpart to the Greek Cronos. In both Roman and Greek mythology, Saturn and Cronos are known for overthrowing their father (Roman Caelus; Greek Uranus), the god of the sky, and for facing death at the hand of their son (Roman Jupiter; Greek Zeus). In *Theogony* (11.453-49), Hesiod recounts how Cronos swallowed each child at birth, intending to prevent any of Heaven's sons from gaining power among the immortal gods. Saturn learned from Earth and Sky that he would be overthrown by his son, despite his strength, due to the plotting of his youngest son, Zeus. But these gods were viewed in two different ways. The Roman myths emphasized Saturn's benevolent role as the God of Agriculture and Cultivation, minimizing his castration of his father Uranus (Davis, 2020).¹⁰ Greek mythology associated Cronos with Time, metaphorically alluding to the consumption of all things. He was also seen as a ruthless deity who perpetuated the violent legacy of his father, consuming his children. Lama selected the Greek mythological version for her depiction of Saturn.

Interestingly, a century before Lama's portrayal, the Belgian Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) rendered a visceral vision of Saturn, brandishing his scythe and consuming the flesh of his son in the artwork *Saturn Devouring a Son*, 1636-1638, oil on canvas, now at the Museo del Prado in Madrid. Rubens's depiction

⁶ Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and Workplace in the Preindustrial City* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991/2007/2010).

⁷ Christopher Seddon, *Saturn: The Ringed Planet From Galileo to Cassini-Huygens* (Shrewsbury, UK: Glanville Publications, 2021); Bruno Deiss and Volker Nebel, "On a Pretended Observation of Saturn by Galileo", *Journal of the History of Astronomy*, 29(3) (July 1998), 215-220, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002182869802900301>.

⁸ Ruggeri, *Dipinti e disegni di Giulia Lama*, p. 120; Macri Puricelli, *Giulia Lama* (Mirano/Venice: Eidos 2002), p. 5.

⁹ The Libreria Antiquaria Coenobion (4336) in Asti owns a copy. See <https://www.ebay.it/itm/161879609040?itmmeta=01JXWZV4ZYGPF1S9W6TTBWTTK&hash=item25b0c6ced0:g:NscAAOSw7hRWO3Fg>. In my previous article, I erroneously suggested that Padre Maffei could be Scipio Maffei (1675-1720?), a known Veronese scientist and writer.

¹⁰ Charles Davis, "Giorgio Vasari: *La Castrazione del Cielo Fatta da Saturno*, 1588", *Fontes*, 47(10) (February 2020), 3-13.

unfolds amidst celestial clouds and a tumultuous storm, wherein Saturn's gruesome act is dramatically visualized as he devours his progeny. Furthermore, Rubens's awareness and connection to Galileo's discovery of Saturn is suggested by the presence of three luminous stars in the sky behind the figure of Saturn's head (Luna, 2007, p. 369).¹¹ Lama exercised more restraint in depicting the violent classical scene.

Unlike Rubens's celestial, nocturnal, and stormy depiction, Lama's *Saturn Devouring His Child* is set during the fall season in a natural hollow of the earth, characterized by a woody and rocky landscape from the Veneto area—a cavern area is symbolically perceived as a sanctuary for concealment and for engaging in forbidden practices, implying a burial site, as exemplified by the imagery of Saturn devouring his son and ultimately representing the child's burial ground (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, pp. 167-172).¹² Lama used autumn colors—variations of browns, dark greens, and oranges—to set up the seasonal time. In the foreground, positioned diagonally, is the prominent figure of a partially nude older man (Saturn), whose genitals are modestly covered and protected by a mantle. Lama composed several drawings using the nude male body with bent and extended legs, as seen in the collection of drawings at the Correr Museum in Venice (Surian, 2018, pp. 5, 7, and 18).¹³ Saturn holds a nude baby (his son) in his arms. At first it seems that he is kissing the child, but then the horror is revealed: He is grasping the baby's torso and legs while opening his mouth to bite into the flesh of the child. The viewer cannot see the child's face and fearful expression, but his open hand, fingers spread, indicates a call for attention and help (Caselli, Rinaldi, Stefanini, & Volterra, 2012).¹⁴ In Lama's typical manner, she dramatized the scene through light effects. The child is bathed in a soft, golden light, and his fleshy body of light cream colors reveals his tender age, contrasting with the dappled light on his father's darker olive skin and muscular physique, which mirrors the ruggedness of the rocky terrain.

Lama's depiction of *Saturn Devouring His Child* also acknowledges the religious significance of this theme in the context of the Counter-Reformation. The Counter-Reformation aimed to reform the Catholic Church by clarifying its teachings, addressing abuses, and attempting to draw people back to Catholicism. This involved refining various aspects of doctrine, reorganizing church structures, establishing new religious orders, and revitalizing Catholic spirituality in many areas. In art, the representation of violent human events, the Church sought to extend forgiveness for humanity's unforgivable and sinful actions, and thereby emerged a novel genre: the visualization and glorification of martyrdom (Lev, 2018; O'Malley, 2002).¹⁵ Hence, through the Counter-Reformation's impact and the re-emergence of Catholic doctrine, Lama was driven to create visually striking themes (Anthony, Carroll, & Pennock, 2020; Zika, 2020).¹⁶ Yet she aimed to uphold the Christian principle of selfless giving through a martyrdom scene where the virtue was applauded. Lama also portrayed biblical themes

¹¹ For the image, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saturn_%28Rubens%29; and see Juan L. Luna, Ed., *From Titian to Goya: Great Masters of the Museo del Prado and National Art Museum of China-Shanghai Museum* (Prado: SEACEX and the Museo Nacional del Prado, 2007), p. 369.

¹² Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Trans. John Buchanan-Brown (London: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 167-172.

¹³ Surian, Ed. *Giulia Lama: Nudi*, pp. 5, 7, and 18.

¹⁴ M. C. Caselli, P. Rinaldi, S. Stefanini, and V. Volterra, "Early Action and Gesture 'Vocabulary' and Its Relation With Word Comprehension and Production", *Child Development*, 83(2) (2012), 526-542, <https://srd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01727.x>.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Lev, *How Catholic Art Saved the Faith: The Triumph of Beauty and Truth in the Counter-Reformation Art* (Nashua, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2018); John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Robert Anthony, Stuart Carroll, and Caroline Dodds Pennock, Eds., *The Cambridge World History of Violence: 1500-1800 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Book Section iii, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316340592>; Charles Zika, *Visualizing Violence in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

from the Old Testament in two oil-on-canvas versions of Judith and Holofernes. An earlier version of 1725 is at the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice, and a later version of 1735 is at the G. Rossi Collection in Milan.¹⁷ From the New Testament, Lama depicted a *Crucifixion*, 1750, oil on canvas, in the Church of San Vidal in Venice.¹⁸ These biblical themes were accompanied by subjects from the life of the saints, including the *Decapitation of Saint Eurosia*, 1725-1730, oil on canvas, now in the Ca' Rezzonico Museum in Venice (Figure 2) (Cheney, 2017, pp. 233-236).¹⁹



Figure 2. Giulia Lama, *Decapitation of Saint Eurosia*, 1725-1730, oil on canvas.

Ca' Rezzonico Museum, Venice.

Photo credit: Ca' Rezzonico Museum, Venice.

¹⁷ For the paintings, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%28Venice%29_Judith_and_Holofernes_by_Giulia_Lama_-_Gallerie_Accademia.jpg; and <https://www.pandolfini.it/it/asta-1355/giulia-lama-12019006778>.

¹⁸ For the painting, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giulia_Lama#/media/File:Giulia_lama,_crocifisso_con_gli_apostoli,_1700-40_ca._01_\(allieva_del_piazzetta\).JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giulia_Lama#/media/File:Giulia_lama,_crocifisso_con_gli_apostoli,_1700-40_ca._01_(allieva_del_piazzetta).JPG).

¹⁹ Cheney, "Giulia Lama", pp. 233-236, for the images and explanatory text.

Lama's imaginative and dramatic depiction of a violent classical theme contributes to the repertoire of these biblical representations, which have perplexed the minds of artists, humanists, and philosophers for decades.

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