

Module: Research in Context – ADAD5003

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Question 1: Explore how artists have approached the concepts around 'gender' in art practice; providing evidence from at least two artists or thinkers.

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Introduction.

“The many women who are wounded by the continual public use of women’s bodies today diagnose correctly that women are thereby reduced to objects of desire” (*Warner*, 1985, p. 320) Societal perceptions of women, the way a woman is viewed and the way she views herself stems from centuries worth of objectification of the female body. Throughout history, the female form has been used as a tool by men for their symbolism, story telling and sexual desires. Traditional stories and myth making have played a stark role in ingraining gender stereotypes, helping to place women into categories and symbolic roles. As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d) ‘Myth’ is “An ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts”. Mythological stories and religious narratives have been taught throughout the centuries, many working to ingrain gender roles into cultural beliefs. These roles can be seen depicted through art; this essay will use theory by Marina Warner and John Berger to analyse and compare representations of the female form in paintings with mythological influences by artists such as Titian, Alessandro Allori, and Artemisia Gentileschi.

Sexualisation of the female body in art.



Figure 1 Venus of Urbino (Titian, 1538)

Figure 1 shows Titian's famous painting 'Venus of Urbino' depicts the Roman goddess of love and beauty 'Venus'. In this painting, Venus can be seen reclining; her body draws attention instantly as her soft, white body almost glows against the dark, domestic setting in the background. The black curtain draped behind Venus encourages the viewer to focus their attention on the left half of the portrait; the viewer then becomes drawn into the painting by the inviting gaze of Venus. "The ideal spectator is always assumed to be male and the image

of the woman is designed to flatter him.” This quote from John Berger (1972, p.64) approaches the unequal power dynamic between the male as the viewer and the female as the viewed, applying this to Venus of Urbino she can be seen as offering herself to the presumed male viewer, she is an object to be viewed and consumed. Without the context of the paintings title, Titians Venus of Urbino can be viewed as nothing more than a beautiful woman in the nude, which calls into question the integrity of the concept of this portrait. Is the mythological background of Venus being a symbol of love and desire a justification to display a woman in an erotic and sexual way for the gratification of the presumed male viewer? “To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself” (Berger, 1972, p. 54), this quote helps to further the idea that the title of Venus in this case lets the male artist hide objectification of the female body behind the cover of storytelling. The depiction of Venus in this painting encourages the male viewer to develop an association between female sexuality and submissiveness, Venus is demoted from her Goddess status to lounging in a domestic setting and this creates an illusion that even a powerful woman in charge of her own sexuality is available and willing to be accessible to the viewer, even encouraging her perceptions as a sexual object and not as a shared display of sexuality. Presenting a powerful woman such as Venus in this way, allows her image to be turned into a harmful ideal to be placed upon women, it pushes one standard of beauty; white with soft feminine features and this ideal has had long lasting implications for the way women are viewed and view themselves in society.

Women portrayed through the male gaze in religious art.



Figure 2: Susanna and the Elders (Allori, 1561)

Figure 2 shows Alessandro Allori's 1561 rendition of Susanna and the Elders, a common Biblical telling to depict through art, it is from The Old Testament book of Daniel chapter 13 and in the narrative Sussana is a righteous married woman who is viewed by two elders, they grow lustful for her after seeing her and eventually decide to sneak into her garden while she bathes in order to blackmail her into complying with their sexual desires, even when being blackmailed Susanna does not give in and says "I choose not to do it and to fall into your hands, rather than to sin in the sight of the lord" (Daniel 13:23, RSV-CE) the elders appear before the community and accuse Sussanna of laying with a young man, they are believed as they are trusted members of the community and Susanna is sentenced to death. Fortunately, the lord hears her cries and the holy spirit takes form through a young man named Daniel, who then rescues her and proves the elders to be lying. According to the Royal Collection Trust, (n.d) "Susanna highlights the moral triumph of truth and virtue over evil and lust" this shows a rich and deep meaning that Allori's rendition does not encompass, Figure 2 depicts a central focus on Susanna in which her naked body is turned and posed in a way that perfectly presents itself to the 'presumed male viewer'. The narratives meaning becomes lost in the objectified display of the female body, contradictory to the moral meaning of truth and virtue, Allori's depiction of Sussana is deceptive and lustful. The unnecessary display of Susanna turns a story about sexual coercion and victimisation into an excuse for men to look at women's bodies and allows the artist to hide it behind the means of religious narrative. This perspective can be applied "The trope values one desire – the abductors turmoil of passion – and overlooks the absence of reciprocal desire in his victim" (Warner, 1985, p. 320), Figure 2 misses key moral teachings of the story and avoids representing the real emotions of Susanna and the vulnerability of her position in order to sexualise her without guilt. The painting allows the presumed male viewer to put himself into the position of the elders and take sexual gratification from this viewpoint, this allows men to feel entitled to a woman's body even when depicted in a story condemning this behaviour. These representations show the female viewer that even in a story meant to spread the importance of truth and show an act of courage in a vulnerable time; the female body is still not free from sexualisation.

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male : the surveyed female. Thus She turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision : a sight. (Berger, 1972, p. 42)

This approach applies to Allori's rendition as it shows the female character through the lens of the male gaze, Susanna's depiction teaches women that they are constantly being watched and evaluated by men. To be desirable you must constantly be aware of yourself,

even in a time of great discomfort you must think about your actions and how you present yourself physically, as to not become unattractive to a potential male viewer. As well as an unnecessary display of nudity, Figure 2 shows an unnecessary display of wealth within the painting. The right hand corner shows an arrangement of fruits, framed by beautiful vases. Sussana's hair is adorned with many shiny pearls and delicate ribbons, she sits upon a perfectly sculpted bath that is lined with fine cloth and lace. On her left side sits a small dog which is painted in great detail, the use of such illustrations within this painting transform it into an object to be owned in order to signify social status and wealth. This portrayal of wealth within the work allows Susanna to appear more suited to the male gaze, it allows her to become an asset for the male owner of the painting. She becomes a symbol of virtue but through the lens of male desires, Marina Warner writes of this symbolism of the female form and how it takes identity away from women and transforms them into an object to display male tropes disguised within the woman. In her book *Monuments and Maidens* she says, "Men often appear as themselves, as individuals, but women attest the identity and value of someone or something else" (Warner, 1985, p.331).

The comparison of the male and female gaze in art.



Figure 3: Susanna and the Elders (*Gentileschi*, 1610)

Figure 3 shows Artemisia Gentileschi's 1610 rendition of the Biblical narrative of Susanna and the Elders, to contrast Allori's 1561 depiction of the story. Comparatively, Gentileschi's approach to the storyline is a lot more accurate to the original texts from the Bible. Susanna

is perched on the edge of the stair, she has a simple cloth draping over her right leg, her body is posed in a natural state that captures her uncomfortableness and need to get away. Her hair is shown in a natural state, no fancy pearls or silken ribbons adorn her head. She is a woman in a natural position, she is not dressed up for male viewing and sexualisation. Her body language shows she is startled and she is facing away from the two men as she is not in a comfortable situation or entertaining their advances. Her body is not painted with a white glowing haze that can only symbolise purity and beauty, she has the hues of a natural body and this helps to humanise her and the emotions she is displaying. The background of the painting is bare and lets the viewer focus on the scenario that is unfolding, these aspects contrast to Allori's rendition of *Susanna and the Elders* (1561) as a great display of wealth takes over the meaning of the narrative in his version. Gentileschi's painting has a natural backdrop which only shows the sky, the stair that Susanna is perched on is not overly sophisticated unlike Allori's (1561) version which shows her sitting on a very clean, polished white step. Gentileschi's painting is able to capture the story through the perception of the female victim and not the male perpetrators, she does not allow the male viewer to inhabit the role of the two men and take sexual gratification from this viewpoint. This approach by John Berger "Men survey women before treating them" (Berger, 1972, p. 46), relates as it shows that Gentileschi does not encourage Susanna to be surveyed in a sexually objectifying way, when the male viewer surveys the painting he can not justify projecting his sexual fantasies onto the female subject without fear of guilt. Gentileschi does not invite the male gaze into the work, Susanna does not look through the painting at the viewer, contrasting to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* figure 1 which gazes directly at the viewer in order to invite them into a projection of their desires. Figure 3 proves that these narratives can be powerful tools to capture deeper meanings in art and show struggles of moral wrong, Gentileschi's work highlights how enriched with symbols other paintings can be.

**Although women have rendered the female nude with emotional conviction,
and painted the fruits of peace, the ardour of Liberty, the wildness of Mercy,
no female artist, as far as I know, has ever found rape the appropriate
metaphor for truth's acquisition (Warner, 1985, p. 320)**

This take on the unjustified use of the acts of harm to women to depict symbols and metaphors by Warner can be applied to Gentileschi's work as it supports the idea that male artists objectify the female body by not considering the harmful implications that it has to women in society when they use the female form displayed in an act of violence towards women, for their metaphors. "By condemning the female object of desire, the male observer can presumably have his cheesecake and eat it too" (Titian, 1999, p. 9) Gentileschi's painting breaks the tradition of condemning the woman in order to not feel guilt about her objectification, further highlighting the impact that these narrative could have had for women, instead they are taken over by the sexualisation of the male author/artist to fit their own agenda.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, the way in which mythological and religious stories are narrated through their depictions in art, affect the viewers perception on women and help to carry gender stereotypes and exclude women from the right to their own self, perception of that self and sexuality within it. Using the female body, as a metaphor with a hidden meaning especially in the nude is harmful, as it reduces women to objects and separates real women from the right to their autonomy. Artworks such as Titian's Venus of Urbino and Allori's Sussana and the Elders, use the title of the women and their stories as a cover to justify the blatant and needless sexualisation of their body. The narrative of lust and desire allows the male artists to pose and display women in a way that is suited to the male viewers gaze, diminishing the sentient character of the woman and pushing the mans characterisation of what desire and beauty looks like. "A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display." (*Berger, 1972, p. 54*) The women in the male artists paintings, do not just happen to be naked, they are represented in the nude. It is the first thing you notice about them and becomes their identity, the character of the woman cannot be seen beneath their body. Artemisia Gentileschi's rendition of Susanna and the Elders figure 3 helps to create a contrast of how these storylines could be told without the influences of the male gaze, it reveals just how rich the symbolism and objectification of the female body is in those depictions and shows a refreshing perception of these narratives through the eyes of the woman. Circling back to the introduction, it can now be seen how mythological stories and religious narrative depicted through art by men affects the way in which society views women, how cultural stereotypes of beauty and ideals are formed and consequently how women view themselves through the eyes of the male surveyor.

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