

The Evolution of Gender Expression Within Art

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Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context (BA)

Research in Context ADAD5003AKE309A

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Student ID: 2406544

Word Count: 2569

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Introduction

For years, gender roles have been a prevalent part of human society and by consequence, has been a reoccurring character in the movie known as art. Due to this recurring portrayal, the evolution of gender and the patriarchal expectations that come along with it has been thoroughly documented. From traditional to modern, the gradual changes of gender expression have been preserved in time. As our society moves forward and we cut the ties between the patriarchy and gender, we see more freedom within gender expression within the art world.

The Historic Gender Performance

It is safe to say that, “Wherever gender goes, there follows a performance of what it might be trying to say (Alabanza, 2021).” This is true for historical as well as modern art. In historical artwork we see a stress on the strong and passionate masculine and weak and caring feminine archetype. According to Travis Alabanza in Look Again: Gender, “To be THE MAN, you must be holding, using, running with, or at arm’s reach from a weapon. A weapon becomes an extension of THE MAN, almost as if it is impossible to be THE MAN without fighting something. THE MAN is naturally at his most THE MAN when he is in battle, ideally in battle with other men.” We can see depictions of this in the Portrait of Captain Thomas Lee (1594) by Marcus Gheeraerts II and Colonel Acland and Lord Sydney: The Archers (1769) by Sir Joshua Reynolds.



Figure 1 Portrait of Captain Thomas Lee by Marcus Gheeraerts II (1594) (Portrait of Captain Thomas Lee, n.d.)



Figure 2 Colonel Acland and Lord Sydney: The Archers by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1769) (Colonel Acland and Lord Sydney: The Archers, n.d.)

It seems as though the message in the historical paintings of the art world is to be a man, one must have and/or show little emotion beyond anger, sternness, concentration, or neutrality. If a man is at rest, he is resting with a weapon in hand. If he is in motion, he is in motion with a weapon. The overwhelming presence of ‘masculinity’ and the ability to dominate those around you must be on display at all times.

In contrast, “to play THE WOMAN, sit slightly aloof in the Pre-Raphaelite room, staring into the middle distance slightly to the left, refusing to look straight on. It is important to note that that for the role of THE WOMAN you must be white. . . Once you have perfected the whiteness of femininity, if that is not in antithesis, it is important to perfect the expression of longing for something else. . . If you do not get the part of longing, you may also be cast as simply lying down (Alabanza, 2021).” We see this aspect of femininity depicted in Gretchen (1861) by Joanna Mary Wells, The Bride (1842) by Theodore von Holst, Symphony in White No. 2 The Little White Girl (1864) by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Ophelia (1851) by John Millais.



Figure 3 Gretchen (1861) by Joanna Mary Wells (Gretchen 1861 Joanna Mary Wells, n.d.)



Figure 4 The Bride (1842) by Theodore von Holst (The Bride, n.d.)

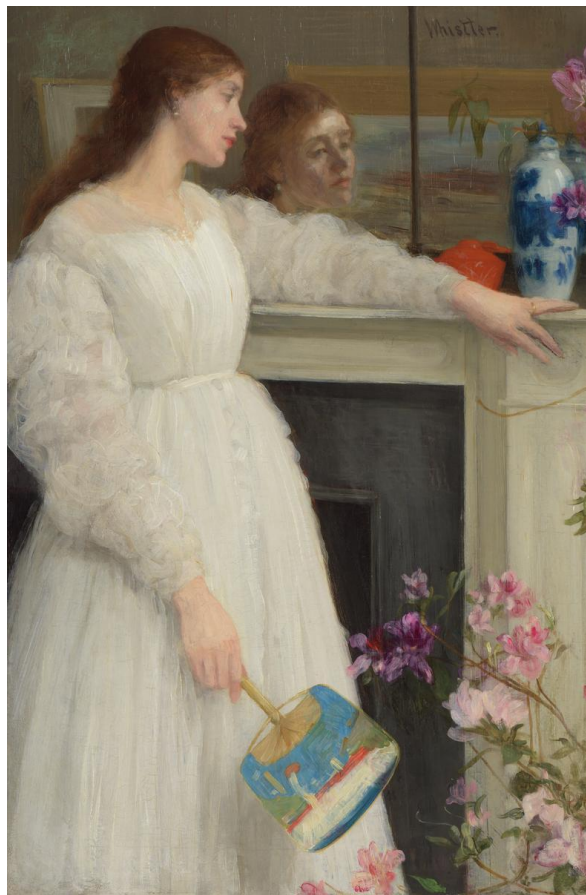


Figure 5 *Symphony in White No. 2 The Little White Girl* (1864) by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (*Symphony in White No. 2 The Little White Girl*, n.d.)



Figure 6 *Ophelia* (1851) by John Millais (*Ophelia*, n.d.)

According to the historic art world, to be a woman one must be calm, docile, domestic and married. A woman can never look anything but weak and attractive. She also can only appear as warm and inviting, or calm and neutral. Anything else is out of the ordinary.

One of the reasons behind this portrayal of strong, “masculine” men and caring, “weak” women is because men are required to dominate women; to exploit and oppress us using violence if they must to keep patriarchy intact (Hooks, 2018). Another reason is due to the fact that within patriarchy, heterosexist bonds were formed on the basis that women being the gender in touch with caring emotions would give men love and in return, men being in touch with power and aggression, would provide and protect (Hooks, 2018). As our society has begun to challenge and detach itself from the patriarchy, more interpretations and expressions of gender have begun to make their way into the art world.

Challenging The Patriarchy

One of the first steps in challenging the patriarchy was made by the Feminist Movement. Before the Feminist Movement, there was an extreme emphasis on a woman’s sexual purity, often “dividing women into two classes– the mistress and the mother (Danchev, 2011).” The first artwork that comes to mind regarding this topic is Jogn Singer Sargent’s Portrait of Madame X (1884). In the original rendition of this artwork, one of the model’s straps was hanging seductively off-shoulder. This detail, however, was one of many behind the painting’s controversy. There was backlash about the pose, the color of the model’s skin, the fact that Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau (the model) was married but openly displaying a sense of sexuality, even Gautreau’s black dress was brought into question (Farago, 2015). Due to the

controversy, Sargent reworked the painting before leaving the country, leaving Gautreau's reputation tarnished (Farago, 2015). Not only did the backlash of this portrayal of gender affect the artist, but it affected the finished form of the painting, and more importantly, harmed Gautreau's reputation in Parisian society.



Figure 7 The Portrait of Madame X (1884) by John Singer Sargent (Farago, 2015)

Despite the sexist iconography of Madonna and whore that continues to claim the erotic imagination of males and females (Hooks, 2018), modern artwork has more freedom to dip its toes into sexual depictions that would have been labeled as scandalous in the past. In the modern art world, we see nude bodies, male and female, and on occasion, these nude bodies are interacting with each other.

For example, see Isaac Julien's *Robert (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)* (1989/2016).



Figure 8 *Robert, Looking for Langston Vintage Series, (1989/2016)* by Isaac Julien (*Looking For Langston, n.d.*)

Although the men are not completely nude, they are showing more skin than the historic art world would have allowed. Also notice that there is no weapon near either man, both have small smiles, and there is an overall sense of contentment. There is also the suggestion that these

two men have had some sort of sexual exchange due to their stages of undress, the money being passed between them, and the relaxed nature of both men's postures.



Figure 9 Isaac Julien's *Pas De Deux No. 2*, *Looking for Langston Vintage Series*, 1989/2016 (*Looking For Langston*, n.d.)

For another look at tender-hearted men depicted in art, see Isaac Julien's *Pas De Deux No. 2* from the *Looking for Langston Vintage Series*. The room is hazy, we can see the blurred shapes of flowers in the bottom left corner, and we can see two men dancing together. Note their expressions of subtle joy, the closeness of their bodies, and the firm yet delicate hold of their hands. It is obvious that these men have a strong, caring relationship with each other, rather it be romantic or platonic. This outward show of affection and care contradicts what it is to be THE MAN in historic art world depictions.

Furthermore, a shift in the way that the female body is being depicted has begun. We no longer see beautiful white women, prim and proper, looking off to the side, sitting innocently yet sensually inviting on plush sofas. We now see beautiful women of all colors, messy, put together, defiant, moving, and so much more. By challenging the notion that a woman's virtue was determined by her sexual practice, feminist thinkers not only took away the stigma attached to

not being a virgin (Hooks, 2018), they also created the opportunity for women to express their femininity in non-traditional ways.

In Louise Jopling's *Self Portrait* (1877), Jopling is looking straight forward with her hair tied back. It's unknown if she is sitting or standing. All we, as the viewer, know is that she is looking at us confidently, without looking to the side in a state of longing.



Figure 10 Louise Jopling's *Self Portrait* (1877) (Reckitt, 2022)

Another example is Sacha Zaliouk's *Eve Adamized*, *Fantasio Magazine* (1927). "The new woman of a liberated age as imagined by Zaliouk wears a suit and tie and her hair in a sleek Eton crop, but signals her gender with makeup, earrings, and a cigarette holder (Gosling,

Robinson, & Tobin, 2018).” Though this take of femininity hangs on the edge of androgyny, it carries its own statement that women do not need to have the hyper-feminine look of the past.

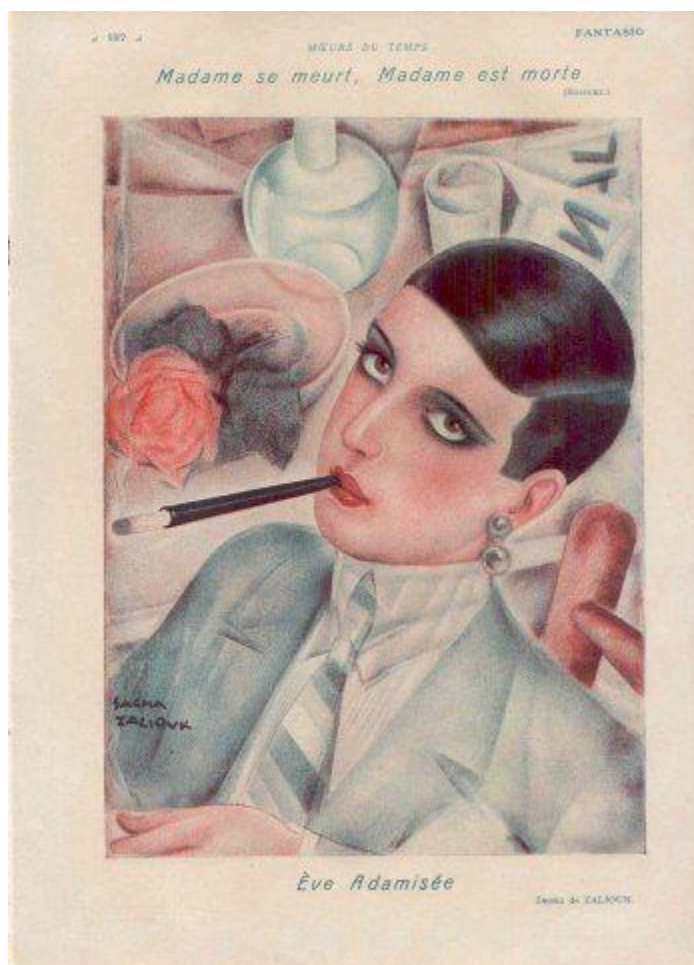


Figure 11 Sacha Zaliouk's *Eve Adamized*, *Fantasio Magazine* (1927) (Gosling, Robinson, & Tobin, 2018)

Claudette Johnson's *Standing Figure with African Masks* (2018) depicts a woman standing, looking at the viewer, with her hands defiantly placed on her hips. We can see that she is not perfectly thin, nor does she have the whiteness of femininity that the historic art world has depicted. We are looking up at her, she is looking down on us, she is confident, real, and by no means the traditional depiction of THE WOMAN.



Figure 12 Claudette Johnson's *Standing Figure with African Masks* (2018) (*Standing Figure with African Masks*, n.d.)

In Penny Slinger's *On Her Lips, You Kiss Your Own*, from *An Exorcism* (1970-77), we see two women who are sensually involved with each other. Similar to Isaac Julien's work, Slinger is depicting a relationship that was not documented in the traditional artworld before. Instead of seeing these women caring for each other, we are only seeing the physicality of their relationship. Judging by the fact that we cannot see their discarded clothing, the wall-sized mirror, and the open windows, we can defer that the women have had this physical relationship for some time, and are not ashamed of it.



Figure 13 Penny Slinger's *On Her Mouth You Kiss Your Own* from *An Exorcism* (1970-77) (*On Her Mouth You Kiss Your Own*, 2014)

However, the emphasis on female beauty and behavior did not stop at a woman's sexual purity; nor, has expectations for males subsided. Before women's liberation, all females young and old were socialized by sexist thinking to believe our value rested solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men (Hooks, 2018). It is still common for females and males to be socialized into their respective gender roles. Girls get Barbie dolls; boys get army soldiers. Girls get pink; boys get blue. Girls can be emotional; boys cannot. Girls will grow into loving mothers while boys will grow into money-making fathers. Women, no matter what stage of life they are in, must always be attractive, fit, and overall good-looking.

Despite this socialization, depictions of women in artwork have, at the very least, moved on from the idea that women are inherently weak and can only be attractive when they are docile.

For example, we see Laura Knight's *Ruby Loftus Screwing the Breech Ring* (1942). Knight depicts Loftus doing something we have rarely seen before: working in a machinery

factory, an environment that was previously dominated by men. Furthermore, Loftus is performing a skill that often took qualified engineers eight or nine years to perfect (Gosling, Robinson, & Tobin, 2018).



Figure 14 Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring (1943) by Laura Knight (Ruby Loftus screwing a Breech-ring, n.d.)

We also see Molly Lamb Boback's *Private Roy, CWAC* (1946). This artwork is particularly interesting because not only are we seeing a woman of color, but Private Roy is a woman of color in the service. Not to mention, Molly Lamb Boback also served in the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Corps for three years before becoming the only Canadian woman to be appointed as an official war artist (Gosling, Robinson, & Tobin, 2018).



Figure 15 Molly Lamb Bobak, Private Roy, Canadian Women's Army Corps, 1946 (Gewurtz, n.d.)

Beyond The Masculine and Feminine

As the constraints on gender expression have loosened, we have begun to see new gender expressions that are beyond the masculine and feminine. In the modern artworld, we see more depictions of androgyny, cross-dressing, and the overall blur of gender expression.

Beginning in the 1920s, “Women’s fashionable silhouette changed radically as hemlines rose, restrictive corsets were cast aside, and hair was cut into boyish crops. This dawning postwar age also brought with it a taste for cocktails, nightclubs, and new, modern dances inspired by the exciting sound of jazz . . . In the press, women were pictured smoking, driving cars, and playing golf – it was not necessarily an image that accurately reflected all of society,

but this confident, modern Miss became the symbol of the 1920s (Gosling, Robinson, & Tobin, 2018).” Thanks to this new, tomboy look, we see artworks like Lois Mailou Jones’s *Self Portrait* (1940).



Figure 16Lois Mailou Jones’s *Self Portrait* (1940) (*Self Portrait*, n.d.)

Furthermore, during this period, Claude Cahun enters the art scene. Born Lucy Schwob into a French-Jewish, middle-class family, Claude Cahun did not identify with any gender, describing herself as “neuter” (Gosling, Robinson, & Tobin, 2018). Cahun’s body of work consists of self-portraits that explore identity beyond conventional depictions.

In Cahun's *Self-portrait (reflected image in mirror with checkered jacket)* (1928), Cahun's appearance lies somewhere between feminine and masculine, a true case of androgyny.

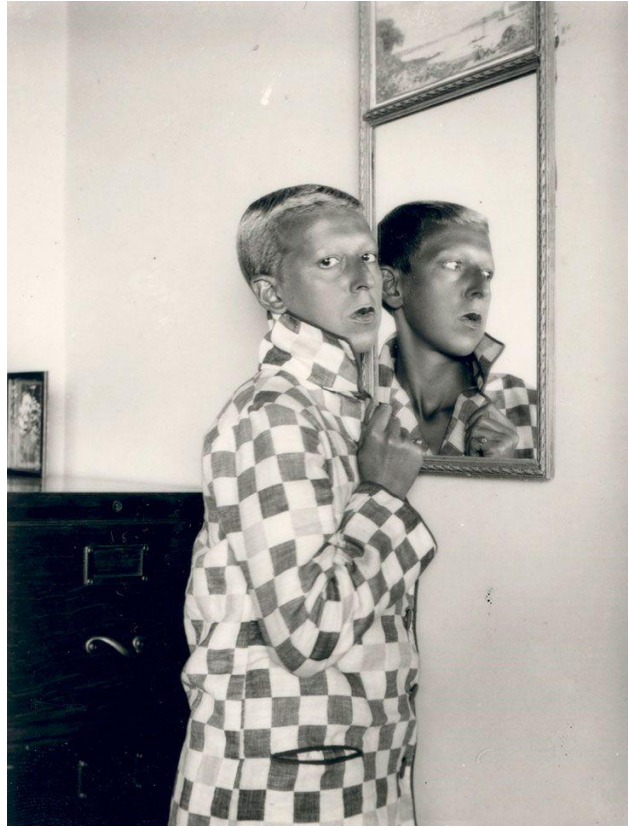


Figure 17 Cahun's *Self-portrait (reflected image in mirror with checkered jacket)* (1928) (Reckitt, 2022)

In Zanele Muholi's *Miss D'Vine 1* (2007), we see the drag queen, Miss D'Vine in traditional South African clothing, in a subversion of traditional expectations of gender roles and performance (Reckitt, 2022). Not only is the fact that Miss D'Vine being a drag queen speak of the relaxed nature of gender in the modern art world, it also challenges the traditional depiction of men and women.



Figure 18 Zanele Muholi's Miss D'Vine 1 (2007) (Reckitt, 2022)

Before, in the traditional art world, a man would have rarely, if ever, been depicted in women's clothing. Despite this, Miss D'Vine willingly and confidently dresses in women's clothing and dawns a more feminine persona. To add icing to the cake, Miss D'Vine also allows this behavior to be documented by Muholi.

This newfound blur of gender within the art world has allowed men and women to be more expressive and experiment with their appearance, behavior, and gender. It has also allowed us, as the viewers, to experiment and express vicariously through the artists, changing our gender perception.

Conclusion

We are all in a very long durational performance piece with gender (Alabanza, 2021), but the performance was started long before we, as the modern art world, stepped onto the movie set. The beginning scenes are full of men having little to no emotion, weaponry or violence never far from them, and women who are sitting or standing peacefully, looking into the distance with a

sense of tranquility. In more recent takes, we have begun to see thoughtful, emotional, softer men and women who are doing more than just sitting prim and proper on a sofa. We have also begun to see the sensuality between men and women, rather than sensuality be homoerotic or heterosexual, not to mention newfound expressions of androgyny. We can actively see as we continue to move away from patriarchal values, more depictions of gender have and will continue to arise.

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