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# Female archetypes in art

## Introduction

This exhibition considers how the representation of women in visual art, specifically paintings and photographs, has changed over time. It has been organised to help the visitor dwell on the currently topical debate between what, when conceptualising “woman”, is intrinsic and what might arise from social perception.

In the modern age, until relatively recently, there were few female artists. Women, consequently, created few artworks that gave a feminine interpretation of themselves or their gender and so women, in the main, appeared in paintings only in a form as perceived and drawn by men. As Berger put it:

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 is female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight.

(Berger, 1977, p. 47)

The two archetypes typically represented in such paintings saw the woman either as a mother or as an object of desire. As a mother the woman would normally be engaged in some way with a child, whereas in the alternative, erotic depiction, the woman would often be partly or wholly nude.

These two portrayals are plainly a very narrow characterisation of what it means to be a “woman”. It would be like portraying men only as workers and warriors - something that the men producing the paintings would recognise to be inappropriate because of their own, cultured and artistic, nature.

Different reasons have been advanced for why women's portrayal was so restricted and why it has changed more recently. Simone de Beauvoir summarised the potential causes: "If so few female geniuses are found in history, it is because society denies them any means of expression."  
(De Beauvoir, 1997, p.29)

While Carol Hanisch and Betty Friedan helped launch the second wave of feminism from the 1960's with their calls to action:

It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say. (Hanisch, 1970, p.3)

It would be a great service to tell girls [...] not to be quiet, and hope it will go away, but fight it. A girl should not expect special privileges because of her sex, but neither should she "adjust" to prejudice and discrimination.

(Friedan, 2010, p.17)

With Friedan making a specific call for the feminist to become an artist: "The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own."  
(Friedan, 2010, p.22)

As more women, following this encouragement, became artists, art collectors and benefactors it became possible for women to rethink and remodel their own image in the visual arts.

Consequently, the paintings shown in this exhibition have been selected to take the visitor on a journey from the historic idealised portrayal of woman to show some of the ways in which that limited view has expanded and developed over time into the modern more realistic and complex representation. It is hoped that in travelling this journey the visitor will contemplate better what it might mean to be "woman" and to develop a more profound understanding of the variety of types that exists under that label.

The exhibition is limited in scope, it seeks only to inform and stimulate thought, it is not designed to lecture. It aims to show that what a woman is is more complex and varied than the early modern conception, exactly as any individual woman is a fascinating mixture of attitudes, attributes and behaviours. This true-to-life understanding of the variety of characteristics that women may have has never been more important. Whereas the works exhibited show the expansion of the definition of woman as represented in the visual arts over time, in the political sphere there is currently an aspect that seeks to again limit that definition, assigning traits to either a “male” or a “female” bucket. Against that, this exhibition shows that a woman can be both, either or neither mother and worker, sex-object and warrior.

The artists shown in the exhibition were chosen because of the strong emotional impact of their work. For this study power or beauty are not relevant, the objective is to seek and show works that provide an insight into the depicted individual so that, on “meeting” them, the visitor forms a human perception of their character in the way one person forms an impression when meeting another. The pieces are in categories, those which show changes in the representation of motherhood and those which show the evolution in the perception of a single model, from an erotic object to a real person. As Friedan put it:

Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to become themselves? Who knows what women's intelligence will contribute when it can be nourished without denying love? \*(Friedan, 2010, p.45)

## The Paintings



Fig.1 Leonardo Da Vinci *Madonna Litta* (15th century)

Madonna Litta is a late 15-century oil painting, historically thought to be painted by Leonardo Da Vinci between 1481 and 1500. It is a fine example of the representation of a mother in traditional Christian iconography. The Mother archetype in art has been common throughout history, from the Goddess of fertility and the Greek-roman culture of Demetra to the Christian idolised idea of the sacred Madonna. The mother figure has universal importance and appeals to all individuals regardless of their gender. Its importance can't be overstated, as motherhood is essential for survival of the species.

The painting, in which the Virgin Mary is shown breastfeeding the infant Jesus, embodies the sacred, purified, and glorified image of a mother. Such representation was typical for the historical period when the Christian Church was the main art benefactor and commissioner, the majority of the art subjects were derived from the Bible and the art generally was not secularised. The religious images of the mother were meant to inspire, console and give hope to viewers and in this respect the Madonna Litta acts as a sublime example, perfectly fulfilling the purpose.

As we see in Da Vinci's painting, aesthetic traditions defined the image of the mother as sublime, serene and hopeful, even if the story behind it was about the eventual loss of the child through a horrible death. Unfortunately, such ultimate adoration and glorification of the mother archetype created a chasm between the idealised image and the existence of regular mothers. Mundane chores, routine and the struggles of motherhood were not acknowledged. Moreover, Christianity shifted focus from the mother to the child, the mother became an addition to a child, not a central figure.



Fig.2 Kathe Kollwitz *Woman with a dead child* (1903)

Kathe Kollwitz's etching 'Woman with a dead child' brings the viewer back to visceral, real mother's feelings. Kathe Kollwitz, one of Germany's most important early 20th-century artists, explored intensively in her art human suffering caused by adverse social conditions and wars, and grieving women were especially poignant and recurring themes in her work.

In the etching one gets the raw, devastating feeling of a mother who lost her child. The image of a strong woman turned by unimaginable grief into a wild wailing animal leaves everlasting memory in one's soul.



Fig. 3 Dame Paula Rego *Pinocchio and the Blue Fairy* (1997)

Dame Paula Rego contributed significantly to the British art scene and was a member of the London Group. Her pastel painting 'Pinocchio and the Blue Fairy' created in 1997 brings a viewer to a different and complex form of relationship between a child and a mother figure, here the godmother. This female persona represents a version of a goddess - a "fairy" but not an omnibenevolent one. The artist shows this fantasy figure in its earthbound form as an aged, tired woman, who nevertheless has powers both to enchant and, at the same time, perhaps because of her special connection to the child, to unsettle. This motherly figure is ambivalent, slightly sinister and dominating but as the story suggests, she gives a powerful promise to change the life of the child, to perform some kind of initiation. The artist managed to challenge both the historical art representation of women as unequivocally good, like the Madonna Litta and also the fairy-tale idea of compassionate fairy.



Fig.4 Amrita Sher-Gil *Self-portrait as Tahitian* (1934)

The last two artworks give a modern take on gender roles and finding one's identity. Amrita Sher-Gil, an artist of mixed Hungarian-Indian background, considered a 'pioneer' in modern Indian art, had a very short but creatively very rich life in the first half of 20 century. Her paintings display a significant influence of the post-impressionism style.

Amrita Sher-Gil takes an interesting angle in her unusual oil painting "Self-portrait as Tahitian". Here one sees a model and an artist as one. The brave self-nudity of the subject touches upon the tradition of the representation of the female form but simultaneously defies the patriarchic expectations of the Indian society of the time and the objectification of the nude female body in traditional fine art. Her nudity is a challenge, full of confidence and self-definition. Here the artist deals not only with the complexity of being a model and an artist as one but also with attempts to find a new identity for an educated and talented woman from a mixed ethnic and cultural background.



Fig.5 Sarah Lucas *Self portrait with two fried eggs* (1996)

Sarah Lucas' photographic 'Self portrait with two fried eggs' belongs to a group of twelve photographic self portraits. The Self Portraits is a series of twelve pictures taken between 1990 and 1998 and are an important element of Lucas's work. Lucas is out to uncover her own identity both as an artist and as a modern woman. Her appearance is androgynous, no make-up or 'feminine' clothes, her pose is dominating and could be defined as masculine but has a degree of vulnerability, partially due to the visual pun present. Lucas used food as a metaphor for sexual body parts in her works to reveal routine objectification of the body in visual art.

The direct gaze in the image makes one uncomfortable, but it sends a real and powerful yet humorous statement about an identity of a woman and an artist in a modern society.



Fig.6 View of a model of the exhibition in the Mission Gallery (2021)



Fig.7 View of a model of the exhibition in the Mission Gallery (2021)



Fig.7 View of View of a model of the exhibition in the Mission Gallery, the Apse (2021)

*A video of a model of the curated exhibition: 'Female Archetypes in Art' in the Mission Gallery*  
YouTube, 2021 Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhIVw8eNiD8&t=4s>

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