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Within my proposal for my dissertation, I will discuss the three key words that I feel is most relevant in talking about how women are shown and portrayed in the art world in past and present. I will use the worlds 'Venus', 'Protagonist' and 'Women Artists'. I feel these are three good discussion points when talking about this subject and will be able to expand further when writing my dissertation. Firstly, I will start with 'Venus', I will talk about the work of Diego Velazquez specifically 'Rokeby Venus'. I will explore the story behind the painting and why the paintings of Venus are considered to be popular. Secondly, I will use the key word 'Susanna', I will look at the works of Tintoretto's 'Susanna and the Elders' and Artemisia Gentileschi's 'Susanna and the Elders'. I want to discuss how the two artists painting the same story interpreted it in different ways, in terms of what those differences are and how a male artist and a female artist differ in their approach to the painting. Lastly, I will discuss 'Male Gaze'. I want to discuss how art history has only been seen through the eyes the male artist. For instance, why does the female body have to be naked? For this I will use John Berger's book 'Ways of Seeing' to help me better analyse this and understand certain symbolism within a painting. Frida Kahlo is another artist I want to understand more deeply, due to her being a symbol for feminist art and her take on the male gaze.



Velazquez D (1647) 'The Toilet of Venus' (Rokeby Venus) (Accessed on 4th May 2022)

For centuries, Venus has been a prominent feature in the art world, she is featured throughout many works such as 'The Birth of Venus' by Sandro Botticelli and 'Sleeping Venus' by Giorgione and Titian. Depiction of Venus, the goddess of love fertility and beauty, can often be seen in paintings that hang in museums and galleries. In 1647, Diego Velazquez painted 'The Toilet of Venus', also known as 'Rokeby Venus'. The name 'Rokeby Venus' came from J.B.S Morritt who had purchased the painting in 1813 and then hung in his home at Rokeby Park in Durham. It was painted during a time when Spain had a high religious climate and the consequences of a painting like this could lead to excommunication. The painting shows a woman laying on a bed naked, her body is free from imperfections, and she is looking into a mirror that is being held up by a cherub. Her gaze is looking towards the viewer through the mirror, with no obvious expression on how she is feeling, no sign of discomfort about being exposed to the viewer (McCormack, 2021).

'Rokeby Venus' became the symbol for female beauty, with her unidentifiable face it gives the viewer a chance to imagine what she looks like. In John Berger's 'Ways of Seeing'

he talks about how a mirror in a painting can often be interpreted as a symbol of vanity and that to be understood in this painting. Velazquez included this to show that Venus has become her own spectator along with the viewer, he painted her naked for the pleasure of the male view but included a mirror to show her vanity, Berger phrased it as “Morally condemning the women whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.” (Berger, 2021). The painting became one of the most famous paintings within London’s National Gallery collection (Loxton, 2022). 247 years after the painting was produced, suffragette Mary Richardson went to the National Gallery and proceeded to slash at the painting with a large knife. Richardson’s act was not in vain, as she said,

“I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful women in mythological history as a protest against the Government destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history” (McCormack, 2021)

Richardson is referring to Emmeline Pankhurst who along with other imprisoned suffragettes had received brutal treatment. Her act was to show how a painting of a naked woman deemed to be more valuable than the bodies of real life women. She showed that the symbol of beauty on the canvas is just an object unlike the suffragettes who were then imprisoned and abused. Richardson later went on to say she hated how men would stand in front of the painting gawping at it. ‘Rokeby Venus’ was painted by a man to be viewed by men, that is why her body is seen to be the unrealistic ideal for women to strive for and the main point of focus for male desire. Knowing this you can understand why Richardson chose this piece to use as her fight back against the unjust treatment of her fellow suffragettes (McCormack, 2021).



Tintoretto J (1555-56) 'Susanna and the Elders' (Accessed on the 4th May 2022)

Susanna and the Elders, the story from the Book of Daniel, has been a feature in many paintings from the sixteenth to seventeenth century. What is surprising about each depiction of this story is how each artist has portrayed Susanna differently. When looking at Jacopo Tintoretto's 'Susanna and the Elders' 1555-56, it tells a different story to Artemisia Gentileschi's depiction from 1610. The story of Susanna is not a pleasant one, while the young beautiful Susanna was having a bath in her garden, two men came and spied on her, they then went on to try and rape her and if she does not comply, they will ruin her reputation (Garrard, 1982).

Firstly, looking at Tintoretto's version of the story, you can see Susanna calmly bathing while being spied on by the 'Elders', one that is hiding behind a bush and another standing in the background. So, what is striking to me is why Tintoretto's Susanna looks so contempt whilst being watched. She is looking into a mirror that is sat in front of her, just like 'Rokeby Venus'. In many versions of 'Susanna and the Elder' a mirror is not included in

the composition, so adding the mirror comes across as an intentional detail that Tintoretto included in the painting. This detail refers me back to John Berger's take on it, he describes in his book that Susanna, by doing this has also become a spectator, along with the view and the Elders (Berger, 2012). Could that be the reasoning for her face that shows no discomfort in the fact that she is being watched? Did Tintoretto not want to have Susanna show any discomfort so that she would be a more desired figure by the men that this painting was targeted for?

Secondly, looking at Gentileschi's version, at first glance some might think they were not depicting the same story. Gentileschi looks at this story from a different perspective, this could be due to the hardships that she had to endure as a young woman. She was the daughter of Orazio Gentileschi and having grown up around painting, she developed an interest. When her skills started to develop her father had Agostino Tassi to teach her. However, in 1612, Tassi was accused, by her father of raping her. Having tricked her into letting him into her bedroom, and whilst she tried to fight back, she was unable to stop him. Tassi did not show any remorse for the act he had committed to Gentileschi and when the trial for his crime came, she was the one tortured while Tassi was able to walk free due to the Pope of the time favouring his artworks (Mead, 2022). Gentileschi's history is important when looking and comparing two artworks such as Tintoretto's 'Susanna and the Elders'. In Gentileschi's version you can see the obvious discomfort that Susanna is feeling being approached by the two men, you are able to see how vulnerable she feels in that moment while the two men conspire together.

When looking at both paintings mentioned side by side you can see the obvious differences in how each artist has interpreted the painting. Tintoretto's painting comes across more sexualised, as if she is gone there to be looked at, that it was her intention, but Susanna is too busy looking at herself in the mirror to notice that she is being watched (Mead, 2022). However, Gentileschi sees this in a completely different way. Whilst the men are talking to each other behind her, Gentileschi's Susanna looks disgusted, uncomfortable, and scared. She painted Susanna as the victim of unwanted male sexual desires. The painting was finished before Tassi had assaulted her. We can see why Tintoretto painted his Susanna to be more docile and vainer due to the fact that art at the time was made by men and was seen by men (McCormack, 2021).



Gentileschi A (1610) 'Susanna and the Elders' (Accessed on 4th May 2022)

Male Gaze

My last key word is the 'Male Gaze', when talking about the women in the art world it is important to bring up the topic of the male gaze. The term 'Male Gaze' has been used a lot throughout art history, it refers to the artistic gaze that the artist has on an object, normally the object being the female form (Kamphausen, 2017). The male gaze can be seen in 'Rokeby Venus' and Tintoretto's 'Susanne and the Elders', as they are both idealised versions of the female body from a male perspective, it takes away the ability of the female protagonist to tell their own story and gives it to the male artist instead. Art history has a shocking past of favouring the white male artist and excluding any other voice. John Berger's 'Ways of Seeing', gives good insight to interpreting paintings, while looking at European oil paintings he talks about how the women in these painting are only naked to meet male desire and not relevant to the story being told. A number of artists included in Berger's book seem to paint the naked woman to be shy and reserved but when you add a mirror into the painting the symbolism changed to vanity. When reading 'Ways of Seeing' I realised that the male gaze is an unrealistic goal for women to aim for. Another quote that stuck with me was "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger, 2012). The quote explains the dynamics between genders through art history, clearly showing how the male is only allowed to look and the women must become the object.



Kahlo F (1940) 'Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair' (Accessed 4th may 2022)

Frida Kahlo was an artist that did not let her being a woman in a 20th century, where sexism towards female artists was everywhere, break down taboos within her painting, the pieces would explore abortion, breastfeeding and many more. Kahlo did not strive to meet the feminine standards of beauty, she had a mono-brow that would only be amplified in her paintings. Whilst she was being told that she was too masculine, Kahlo was secure and content in herself as a woman (Lowton, 2018). Comparing some of Kahlo's work such as 'Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair' (1940) or 'My Nurse and I' (1937) to 'Rokeby Venus', there is a huge difference in them. Kahlo is taking control of her story or painting and what she want to say. Kahlo once said, "I paint self-portraits because I am the person that I know best. I paint my own reality" (Lowton, 2018). She didn't let the sexist standards in the art world at the time, stop her from creating the artwork that she wanted to make. She for

many, shows that you don't have to be feminine to be considered a woman, she shows you that she is unapologetically her and she isn't ashamed. This has become the reason why she is a symbol of feminism in art.

To conclude, whilst working on my essay a few questions did develop due to further investigation into my three key words. I want to be able to explore why artists have chosen sexiness over showing the original story, questions I came up with that were 'Why do artists choose sexiness over realistic emotions?' or 'Why do some male artists decide to sexualise a traumatic situation'. I feel like these questions would be more sub questions in my independent investigation but interesting starting off points for my research. A key word that I considered for this essay was 'protagonist', as I wanted to explore more of the story that wasn't depicted onto the canvas, leading me to think of a sub question, 'Why do artists paint someone's hardship (assault or rape) as if it's just another landscape?'. After seeing how artists interpreted 'Susanna and the Elders' I wanted to know if other artists had done the same and why. I understood that why wanted people to look in awe at their painting however I don't agree when serious topics are used for selfish gain. I feel like my independent research question is going to be about gender politics as I considered a few topics for this essay, such as racism in 19th century paintings, LGBTQ+ and Gender Identity. If I chose Gender Politics, I will be able to look more into the art world, if there are high levels of inequality in museums, how people were affected by racism they received by the art world. If I chose to do that topic, I would choose more modern artists than the ones in this essay as better reflect the current situation within our society.

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List of Figures

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) <https://medium.com/thinksheet/how-to-read-paintings-susanna-and-the-elders-by-artemisia-gentileschi-28098c776476> [Accessed on 4th may 2022]

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Jacopo Tintoretto, 'Susanna and the Elders', (1555-56)

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/susanna-and-the-elders-jacopo-robusti-called-tintoretto/oQEIXVov8NZf2g?hl=en> [Accessed on 4th May]