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Research in Context

How Gender is Explored in Art Practice

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“Explore how artists have expressed gender in art practice. Providing evidence from at least two artists and thinkers”

In this essay, a semiotic approach will be used to explore how gender is expressed in art practice by both male and female artists. This assignment will begin by defining what semiotics is and how it is used, before going on to explore the work of Leonora Carrington, her approach to surrealism as a female artist and finally, a comparison of two artworks from the Romantic era (1780-1850) by Maria Cosway and William Blake.

Semiotics is defined by dictionary.cambridge.org as “the study of signs and symbols, what they mean and how they are used”. The use of semiotics breaks down images or artwork into its visual elements and allows in-depth analysis of what each element could be interpreted as. Signs themselves can be broken down into two separate categories: icons and indexes. An icon would be something that resembles what it is representing, such as a fire exit sign, an index would be something that indicates the presence of something else, such as footprints in the snow, and a symbol has no obvious connection to what it is representing; therefore the meaning of a symbol can change depending on a variety of factors. The cultures and peer groups individuals grow up in can easily mould and manifest themselves into the thought, feelings actions and reactions that are directed towards life elements, in this case, how an individual can feel about, interpret, or create within a piece of art.

This is pointed out in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) where it states, “The way we see things is affected by what we know or believe.” For example, a pentagram can be a symbol of devil worship in some communities, instilling fear or being used as a warning, but is also representative as a symbol of the elements, of comfort or protection in some others. The way the following paintings have been interpreted here is influenced by my own upbringing and experiences within both my family unit and my peer groups; these views could be easily disagreed with and used as a discussion point.

Leonora Carrington – And then we saw the daughter of the minotaur. (1953).

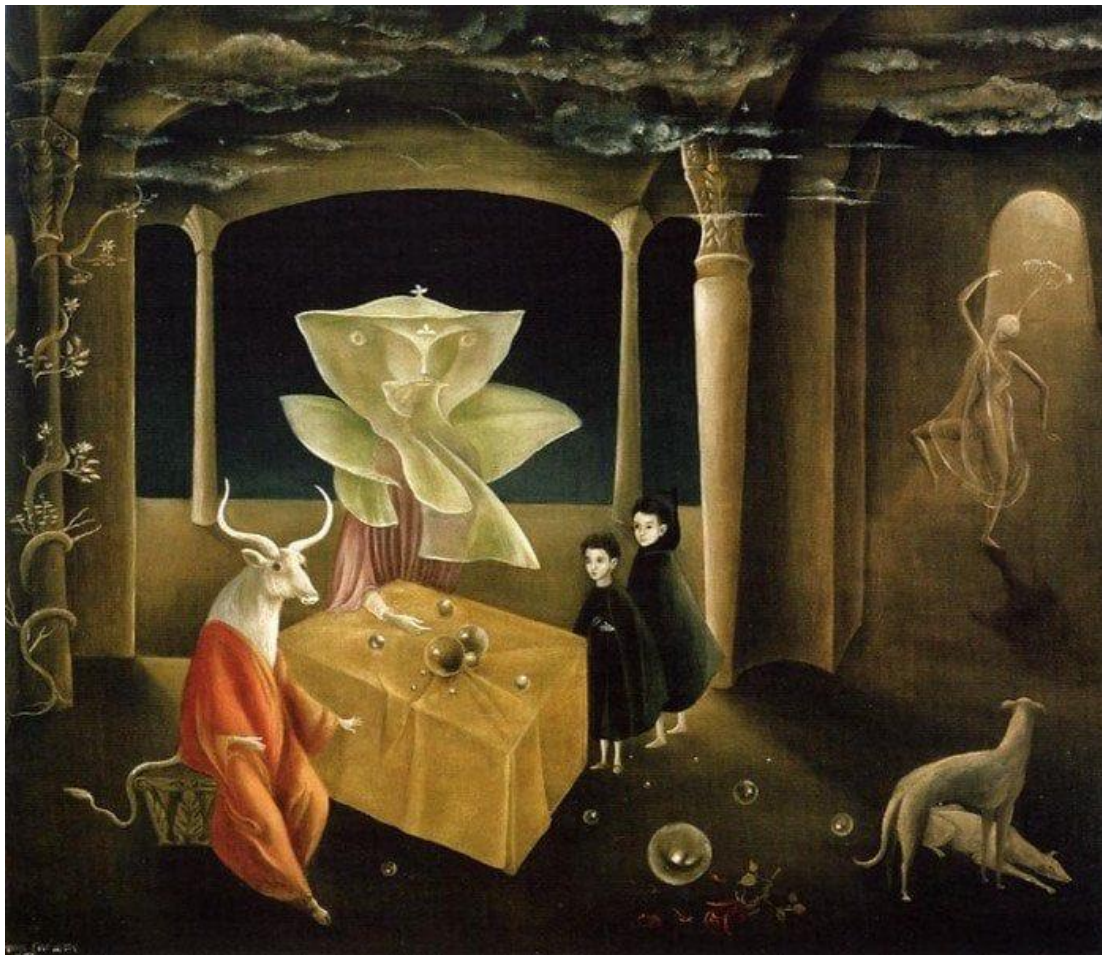


Figure 1: *And then we saw the daughter of the minotaur* by Leonora Carrington (1953)

In this painting, the feminine figure is the central focal point of the painting, with the minotaur's daughter sitting to the left, almost as if she is there for guidance from the mystic in pink. There are many elements of gender in this painting that show that the feminine is considered both delicate and a threat. The contemporary dancer to the right, delicate and entrancing, attracts the attention of the white dog, and potentially takes its attention from what is happening in the centre of the room. It is as if, when surrounded by the softness of a dream-like state, each aspect of the feminine can become one with herself, something that the construction of a patriarchal society will struggle to understand. A second element is that much of the feminine, the mystery of the matriarchal society since the beginning of time, has been almost repressed to the point of forcing it underground, shown by the columns and apparent night sky scene on the ceiling of the image.

Despite this, there is a peace, an awe of the surroundings within this surrealist composition that would lead us into the dream space, a sub-reality where the feminine is supported in their growth through various means, such as the mystic arts, of crystallo-mancy, astronomy or spheromancy and this is further supported by the presence of orbs in the image, with the theory of orbs representing spirit. The orbs floating around the image are drawn towards the larger-than-life character at the centre of the piece, who appears to be consulting another realm for guidance on behalf of the Minotaur's daughter herself. The children in the image are boys, a representation of young patriarchal minds, dressed in black - a colour of protection in mysticism – further supporting the earlier opinion of the patriarchy repressing all things they regard as witchcraft, mythology, or mysticism, all of which are innately (but not exclusively) linked to the feminine.

Upon further research, it is stated that the mystical white figure in the centre of the painting is a way of Carrington representing herself or including herself in the painting while remaining somewhat anonymous (Manes, C and Umland, A. 2020). This figure is also known as the White Goddess and is described as

A mythic figure who combines the powers of love, destructiveness, and poetic inspiration, and who ruled during a matriarchal period in distant history before she was deprived of her position by patriarchal guards. (Manes, C and Umland, A. 2020).

Now aware of this description of the White Goddess, and the knowledge that she did the same for other figures in her life (Manes, C and Umland, A. 2020) it is logical to consider if this is how Carrington viewed herself and who the other figures in the could be representing or be an indication towards from her reality.

Carrington grew up in Lancaster, to an English father and an Irish mother, she was a rebellious child which saw her being expelled from school on several occasions (Barnes, E. 2021) and had a strong interest in witchcraft and feminine power, which influences the matriarchal nature of her artwork. Her rebelliousness can be seen throughout her career as a surrealist painter too, while other surrealists at the time were focusing on Sigmund Freud's Writing on the Uncanny, Carrington was using her own experiences to influence the work she created. Women quite often ended up being seen as only the muse as opposed to being seen as surrealist artists themselves, while they were the subject of a lot of work by male surrealists (and other male artists all throughout history). Even the writer and co-

founder of the surrealist movement Andre Breton considered women to only have been useful as a muse rather than seen as an artist (Lenkiewicz, A, 2015).

In Greek Mythology the Minotaur was contained in the centre of a labyrinth when the isle of Minos could no longer contain him. The king of Minos would then feed seven young men and women from Athens every year, or every nine years in some versions of the myth, as a sacrifice or offering to the Minotaur. These young people would, according to the fables, often be sent into the Minotaur's labyrinth unarmed for the beast to hunt them, rather than to be hunted by them. Even according to psychologytoday.com, the Minotaur represents "primal fear of the unknown".

The Minotaur doesn't have a daughter according to mythology, so the daughter of the Minotaur in the painting is a character that Carrington has created for the purpose of its symbolism. The Minotaur is often represented in surrealist art, such as Man Rays *Minotaur* (1934) or Picasso's chosen way of portraying himself through his artwork, as Carrington does with the White Goddess. Going by the title of the painting "*And then we met the daughter of the Minotaur*", it is clear that there is a story being told most likely by the boys represented in the painting.

The boys in the painting look to be around the same age as Carrington's sons (born in 1946 and 1947) at the time of the painting being made (Barnes, E. 2021). Arguably, what has previously been discussed could be overlooked regarding what the boys could be indicating within the painting and consider the possibility that, if Carrington is including representations of other figures from her personal life, these could be her children and the White Goddess (a representation of herself) is seen to be guiding the boys through something or even protecting them, relating back to maternal instinct or matriarchal power.

A comparison of how gender is expressed through painting between Maria Cosway's *A Girl by the Sea Repelling the Spirit of Melancholy* (c. 1800) and William Blake's *Frontispiece for 'Europe: A Prophecy'* (1824/27).



Figure 2 (left): *A Girl by the Sea Repelling the Spirit of Melancholy* by Maria Cosway (c.1800)

Figure 3 (right): *Frontispiece for 'Europe: A Prophecy'* by William Blake (1824/27)

In Cosway's painting, the artist has represented a woman dressed in orange who appears to be sitting or leaning on a large rock in the centre of the image, with her head resting on one hand and the other stretched out behind her towards the winged woman on the left of the painting and slightly behind the central figure who is wearing blue and is holding a dark sheet above her head. The setting is that of the coast either at dawn or dusk as shown by the sea in the background and a glimpse of sunlight appearing or disappearing on the horizon. The winged female figure is thought to be representing melancholy (Hyde, 1997, p. 87-68), If this is the case then it brings up the question of why did Cosway choose to represent melancholy as a woman rather than a man.

Like Cosway's painting, Blake's painting is also dark in appearance however it depicts a male presenting god named Urizen with defined muscles, crouching in the centre of the painting and using a compass below himself and dark clouds surrounding him. In the background is a bright orange ball of light shining behind the man and the clouds, this illuminates the figure,

thus drawing attention to him and, along with the way that Blake has painted him to be a muscular figure, represents that he holds a lot of power.

Both paintings were created around a similar time and the gender of the figures within the two compositions are that of the artists who painted them. It would be safe to assume that because of this, gender has been represented in a way that reflects how the artists felt it was to be either a man or a woman in the early 19th century. Cosway's painting generally has a softer feel to it, softer colours, softer shapes and so on, while Blake's painting tends to be louder and bolder in the ways that Cosway's is soft. Each is more stereotypically feminine or masculine respectively.

The male artist has produced an image of awe-inspiring male power and domination, whilst the female artist has produced an image of female weakness and disturbance. (Hyde, 1997, p.67)

The author then considers whether the paintings simply mirror how it was to be male or female in the early 1800s, or if there is something more to investigate, regarding how the figures are portrayed.

Earlier on in this section, it is debated whether the setting in Cosway's painting is at dawn or dusk, however, upon further reading, the painting itself is created as an illustration to accompany a ballad by another female writer which reads:

I rise with the morn, I gaze on the sun.
Aurora's bright lustre I see;

But I sigh with regret when the daylight is gone,
For night brings no comfort to me.

I wander at night where the nightingales sing;
I traverse the sands of the sea;

They hear not my sighs, so no comfort they bring,
For what can bring comfort to me. (Monthly Magazine, 1801, quoted in Hyde, 1997, p.68)

When situated alongside the ballad it becomes clearer that the setting of the painting is in the evening, or dusk, which in comparison to the sun in the background of Blake's painting, both correlate to the personifications of the sun and moon in Greek or Roman mythology, which had a great influence over the arts in the 18th and 19th centuries (artst.com, 2022).

In Greek mythology the sun is represented by the Greek gods Helios and Apollo, Helios being the personification of the sun and Apollo being associated with truth, knowledge, prophecy, and protection (Matyszak, 2010, p. 82), all of which are indicated or represented in Blake's painting, even down to the title of the accompanying written work; "*Europe: a Prophecy*". While the moon is represented by the goddesses Selene, its personified form, and Artemis, who is associated with hunting, nature, childbirth, and womanhood. (Matyszak, 2010, p. 14, 87) These aspects are less expressed in Cosway's painting, nonetheless, the interrelationship between the indication of the sun and moon in each artwork still stands.

The artwork by Blake is interestingly masculine considering he has been labelled "an advocate for androgyny" in an article by Anne K. Mellor in the winter 1982/83 edition of *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*. However, the article later points out that Blake appears to have a consistently sexist portrayal of women and that this disqualifies the claim that he was a genuine advocate for androgyny. Urizen is depicted as an almost god-like figure using the compass to create the world, which in itself implies a power strictly associated with masculinity in Blake's wider range of work as implied by the following quote:

In Blake's metaphoric system, labour is strictly divided on the basis of sex-gender. Males – or the masculine dimension of the psyche – creates ideas, forms, designs; females – or the feminine states of mind – can desire (and thus inspire) these forms but not create them. (Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, 1982, p. 149).

Even if Blake were such an advocate for androgyny and that Urizen is potentially a genderless figure, the way Urizen is portrayed (with the Beard and muscular frame) is still stereotypically masculine and is immediately associated with the patriarchal desire for the masculine to be seen in such a specific way.

To conclude, this essay has explored how gender has been expressed in both contemporary and romantic era artworks. It has been found that in Carrington's painting, the feminine has been represented as stronger and more powerful than it has been in Cosway's painting, while in Carrington's artwork, the masculine has been presented as something small, weak and in need of guidance, thus creating a contrast between itself and the Romantic Era artwork by Blake. Furthermore, where the masculine has been represented as all-powerful and the creator of the world, or god-like in Blake's painting, the feminine figures in

Carrington's painting are those being represented as divine beings, however, they are not represented as human but instead as a minotaur and an other-worldly being.

This change in how gender is represented between the two eras is reflective of how the world's view on gender evolved in the century between the three artworks being created, and therefore it is reasonable to believe that gender is explored accurately and fairly according to their respective time periods.

List of figures:

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Figure 2: *A Girl by the Sea Repelling the Spirit of Melancholy* by Maria Cosway (c.1800).

Figure 3: *Frontispiece for 'Europe: A Prophecy'* by William Blake (1824/27).

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