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- **Gender**
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- **Social Media**

As a young woman and as an artist I am really interested in feminism and feminism within the world of art. This is a topic that I feel very passionately about, and I think it is still very much an important issue in today's society. There are many who believe that feminism is no longer needed because of the view that women have already achieved equal rights, which just isn't true. In this essay I will be exploring the gender roles and norms that have surrounded women in art, how women have been portrayed in paintings throughout history and their relationship with painting. Alongside modern women taking back their rights to their art and their bodies on social media, while helping other women.

### **Gender**



Figure 1: available at: <https://www.thecut.com/article/dior-why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists.html>

“Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.” (WHO, 2021)

My first key word that I will be analysing is “gender”. I chose this word because throughout art history and modern society gender roles have always held influence over how people should act, how they should be represented and how they should be treated. In modern times there has been more urgency to emphasise the difference between a person’s gender and their sex. But in years past men and women were definitively put into box’s that their gender assigned them too. Not a single branch of society was excluded from the pressure of gender roles be it in politics, religion, economics and the arts. In fact the gender roles throughout art history have always directly reflected the gender roles of its societies time. “Art is a product of its time. It is a result of the social, political and religious context in which

it was made.” writes Katryna Santa Cruz (2011) in her blog post entitled Women in Art History.

Before the 1900’s there were very few female artists, why is this? Before the 19th century women did not have the right to a higher education (Institute of Education, 2021). As a woman it was their role to get married and have children. Therefore an education was not deemed necessary nor was it important in the eyes of the patriarchy. And at the time to practice as an artist was deemed a form of education, which was entirely a man’s privilege of the time. Men and artists were often taught in guilds, which doors were closed to women as a result of societies rigid gender roles. If a woman were to become an artist during this time it was likely because she came from a family of artists and so that was her only opportunity to truly learn the craft. An example of a female artist who seized this opportunity was Artemisia Gentileschi, who trained under her father. She would go on to become “the most celebrated female painter of the 17th century” (The National Gallery, 2016) after establishing herself as an artist she would also become the first female artist to join the Academy of the Arts of Drawing in 1616 (The National Gallery, 2016). While she was very fortunate as a woman of her time to become an independent artist, she unfortunately became a victim of her societies flaws. She was raped by Agostino Tassi, a painter and co-worker of her father. While he did go to trial for his crime, his punishment was not enforced by anyone, which was likely a result of the expectations put onto how men are allowed to act in the 17th century and their gender roles.

Saylor Academy published the essay The Dual Representation of Women During the Renaissance (2010), this essay explores the idea of women’s gender roles between the renaissance period to the enlightenment period. The essay presents the dual representation of women in renaissance paintings, this idea is linked to Freuds “Madonna-whore complex”, which is the theory that men either see women as Madonna’s, meaning they are pure, chaste, innocent, virginal etc. or they see women as whore’s or fallen etc. The author of the

essay says that women were portrayed in renaissance paintings as either “virtuous and chaste or seductive and deceptive” (Saylor Academy, 2010) which directly reflects how women were seen during this time period.

### **Painting**



Figure 2: Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2011/may/27/women-artists-exclusion>

My second key word is “painting”, I have chosen this as my keyword because as suggested previously by Katryna Santa Cruz art is “a product of its time”. Therefore paintings are evidence of societies views and ideals that they put on women, which is something I would like to explore more in this section. In the renaissance period women were either portrayed very provocatively or very innocently. Men at the time painted women to portray their fantasies and ideals but didn’t actually value any of those qualities in real women. Women could not act provocatively or the rules of the patriarchy would come crashing down on them. If real women acted the way that the women in their paintings acted, they would be shamed and be known as “fallen women”. The way men portrayed women as their fantasies did not line up to the way that they wanted women to act. Which is also quite hypocritical that the artist can grow and become very popular for painting female nudes and make money from that, when the very people who’s bodies are being displayed erotically have no autonomy over their lives, are told what to do with their bodies and essentially their male counterparts can make a profit out of objectifying them. It very much shows how men had ownership over a woman’s life and her body during this time period. A good example of this is Titians Venus of Urbino, which depicts a fully nude woman as Venus, reclining

provocatively in a renaissance palace. While the woman is meant to be Venus, a Goddess, Titan has completely stripped her bare of any qualities that denote her as the Goddess Venus. He essentially turns her into nothing more than another female nude amongst the horde of female nudes from the renaissance period. ("Venus' displays none of the attributes of the goddess she is supposed to represent), the painting is unapologetically erotic." (World History Project, 2021).

However, there have been female painters that have tried to shift the power of the male gaze and bring back a real portrayal of women. As mentioned before the painter Artemis Gentileschi, one of the few prominent female painters of the renaissance, painted self-assured, powerful female characters in her work. This drastically contrasted against her male counter parts paintings where women would be seen partially nude and swooning or appearing passive and too afraid to look at gore. (Ruth Millington, 2020). Another example of a female artist taking back her identity and highlighting the objectification of women is Frida Kahlo. After her divorce she painted her Self Portrait With Cropped Hair. The painting is of Frida sitting on a chair with scissors in hand, and her hair all over the floor and wrapped around the chair she is sitting on. She wears a man's suit, similar to the ones her ex-husband used to wear, and her hair is cut short. Above her are the lyrics to a Mexican song that translates as "See, if I loved you, it was for your hair; now that you're bald, I don't love you anymore." (Kettenmann, 2016, p.57) this shows that Frida felt like she was loved only for her feminine beauty and qualities. By cutting off her hair, which is often seen as a mark of a woman's beauty she is renouncing the "feminine image demanded of her" (Kettenmann, 2016, p.57) by men and her ex-husband. Frida did actually cut her hair short in real life after her divorce and threw herself into her work. She was determined to make her own living off of her paintings and said " 'I will never accept money from any man till I die.' " (Kettenmann, 2016, p.57).

Of course this only touches the surface of how women have been portrayed in paintings and how women have been treated throughout the history of painting. I would like to research

this further in my 3rd year. I'm very interested in how the pre-Raphaelites treated women and how Elizabeth Siddall is known more for appearing as the model of Millais Ophelia, than for her own work as an artist.

### Social Media



Figure 3: Available at: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/jesy-nelsons-fans-rage-bully-22012277>

My final key word that I would like to explore is “social media”. I have chosen this key word because I think that in today’s society social media platforms like Instagram are worldwide exhibitions. Not only for art but for politics, social justice, campaigning and just the simple but sweet moments of every day life. However, because this is a huge space with users quite literally across the globe using it, like art, it reflects societies ideals and expectations. In this section I will be looking at how social media, and its portrayal of women, can be harmful.

For many years social media has been a space that perpetuates idealised beauty standards that put women to shame with captions such as “Goals” “Thigh gaps for days” “blondes have more fun” etc. and in Naomi Wolf’s book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* she says that “images of female beauty come to weigh upon us.”

(Wolf, 1990, p.2) and that “we are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a weapon against women’s advancement: the Beauty Myth.” Wolf is saying that for all the achievements and independence that women have gained through the feminist movement, we are still under attack from the patriarchy. Because women have achieved so much and have fought for equal ground one of the few vulnerable places left to attack is our beauty. This is because women’s opinions of what is beautiful has correlated to the male gaze and what men find beautiful for centuries, and women can often place their self-worth in their appearance. Wolf says that this violent and contemporary backlash is “because of the old feminine ideologies.” that linger in today’s society. This links back to Titian’s Venus of Urbino where the Goddess Venus is stripped of all of the qualities that denote her as a Goddess. Until she is simply a naked woman staring provocatively at the painter. All of her qualities are reduced to a simple sexual object. Which is similar to what has happened to women in today’s society, our achievements may feel like they don’t matter if we are not attractive or desirable.

Another more recent example of how social media has harmed women comes from a BBC article about the Little Mix singer Jesy Nelson “In a candid and tearful moment, Jesy recalls how she took an overdose after taunts about her looks became too much to bear.” (BBC Three, 2019) Since Little Mix won the X factor in 2011 Jesy Nelson has faced criticism over her appearance on social media and in the tabloids ever since. Despite being a talented performer our society stripped her of her qualities and her humanity, and told her that she didn’t look good enough or that she fit into its beauty standards. This dehumanising objectification caused her to attempt suicide. What could arguably be worse is that many of the online “trolls” were other women. A prominent figure in Nelson’s declining mental health was columnist Katie Hopkins. Hopkins has a history of fat shaming Jesy Nelson on twitter and referred to her as “The fat one” and “chubber” (BBC Three, 2019) even after Nelson lost weight Katie Hopkins always label her as the “fat one” despite Nelson’s talents and qualities. BBC Three reported that Nelson’s fans quickly came to her defence against Hopkins and at the outpouring of support for Nelson and the backlash, Katie Hopkins claims

that she was not bullying or harassing but instead she was ““encouraging girls to be strong.”” (BBC Three, 2019) Katie Hopkins actions against Jesy Nelson perfectly displays her internalized misogyny, because of this she perpetuates the old feminine and sexist ideology of the patriarchy onto younger women. This is a good example as to how women are put on display to be judged on social media and only the women that meet societies beauty standards will benefit from this process.

To conclude, I feel as though I have only touched the surface of the topics related to these key words and I would love to explore them more in my third year. For the gender key word I was really interested in the theme of dual representation in renaissance paintings and how this links to Freuds “Madonna-whore complex”. I would like to look further into the attitudes towards female painters during the renaissance, I imagine that there would have been some form of reaction from society as female painters tried to step out into a male dominated sphere. I feel that this will further highlight the gender norms and roles of the time that I will be researching. I really enjoyed learning about Artemisia Gentileschi ““My illustrious lordship, I’ll show you what a woman can do” – Artemisia Gentileschi.” (Millington, 2020) I found her work really inspiring and refreshing amongst all the male perceived portraits of women from the renaissance. My second keyword was painting, I really admired seeing how artists like Frida Kahlo and Artemisia Gentileschi fought to bring back the qualities of women in their paintings, that aren’t defined by how beautiful they are. To further discuss this key word I would like to talk more about how the pre-Raphaelites treated women and how Elizabeth Siddall is more commonly known for being a model to the pre-Raphaelites, rather than for her own work as a painter and artist. I would also like to go more into the history of “heroic rape” scenes in paintings and how men and women painted these scenes very differently. Finally, my last key word was social media. I feel that I have given more of a background context as to how social media has treated and perceived women. But I would like to discuss how social media is becoming a more positive and inclusive space “The idea of beauty is always shifting. Today, its more inclusive than ever.” (Givhan, Morales, 2020). But more specifically I would like to look more into how

artists and illustrators have responded to the body positivity movement and female empowerment.

The research into my interests of art, feminism and the perception of women has led me to choose the question “How have women been depicted through art history and how does this relate to the modern day perception of women?” I feel that this is a question that I will enjoy researching and writing about. I plan to look further into key artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Elizabeth Siddall and research work by key thinkers such as Naomi Wolf, author of The Beauty Myth, and Linda Nochlin who wrote the essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists”.

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