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Investigating the Objectification of Women in Art

Abigail Ashman

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Investigating the Objectification of Women in Art

The objectification of women in art is a deeply rooted issue within the history of the creative world. Over time, it has evolved into a systematic structure that has shaped the very nature of visual representation. From the early Renaissance to the modern digital age, women in art have predominantly been depicted as muses and figures to be looked at, posed, adorned, and aestheticized for the gaze of, more often than not, men. While feminist artists have long worked to deconstruct this bias, it remains a real and persistent issue in contemporary art today.

In this essay, I will use key terms to trace the evolution of women's representation in art, exploring how women have not only been placed within frames but also metaphorically framed and objectified as muses, symbols, and commodities to be consumed by the viewer. I will reflect on how contemporary artists challenge these inherited moulds and confront the traditional role of the woman-as-muse, and how this role is historically intertwined with objectification and commodification. This essay will conclude with a research question intended to guide further independent inquiry into the representation of women in visual culture.

Muse

The representation of women as muses dates back as far as Greek mythology, where the nine muses were goddesses that inspired the arts, literature and science. While they held divine status, their role was primarily in inspiring others (particularly males). (Varsity Online, 2025) This set the precedent of women being vessels who inspire male creativity rather than creators themselves. This ideal casts the woman as passive, objects that exist for the pleasure of the presumably male gaze. The woman as the muse exists to be seen, not to see herself. Her body is often posed and perfected nude or semi-nude for the enjoyment of the viewer.



Figure 1

Venus of Urbino by Titian is a striking depiction of how women have been traditionally represented as muses in art. The woman is naked, lying confidently on a bed, looking directly out at the viewer. Her nakedness and pose suggest both seduction and availability, her body isn't posed for comfort or realism, but to attract the eye of the viewer. The soft lighting, calming interior, and the relaxed positioning of her hand and expression all signal that she is aware that she is being looked at and is posed for the purpose of attracting the gaze of the viewer.

This links directly to what John Berger says in his book *Ways of Seeing*; "men act and women appear." (Berger, 2008) which perfectly encapsulates the historical dynamic within western art that men create, interpret and express while the muse (the woman) is an object to be seen, admired and idealised but remain voiceless and still. Thus suggesting that the muse is not a person with thoughts, desires or individual purpose but a mirror for male expression, where her value is rooted in how well she can inspire the artist.

Berger goes on to say that "Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger, 2008) which highlights how deeply internalised this visual dynamic becomes, not just in art, but in the manner in which women are socialised to see themselves. It suggests that women are socialised to be hyperaware of their appearance, to perform for the gaze even in the absence of an actual viewer. In art, this translates to female figures being posed so as to convey the awareness of self, but not self-possession. In *Venus of Urbino*, the woman's direct gaze and reclining posture reflect this self-awareness but do not indicate power. She is not acting, she is appearing, embodying the ideal of the muse as an object of vision rather than the subject of a narrative. Her role is not to challenge or engage, but to submissively please and inspire the male artist along with to satisfy

the male viewer. This performance for the gaze is central to the tradition of the muse, and to the broader theme of the objectification of women in art.

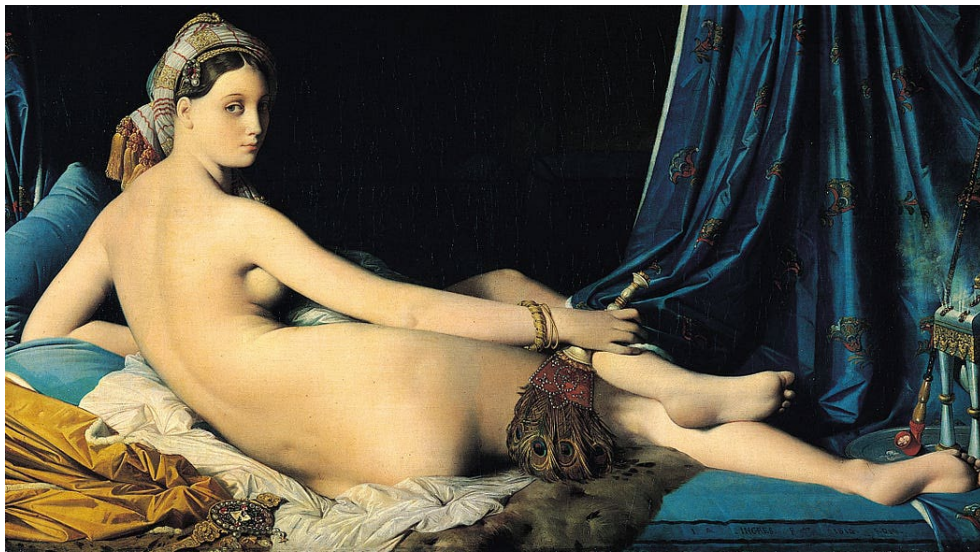


Figure 2

Grande Odalisque by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres is another example of a historic artwork which depicts a woman as a muse. According to the Oxford Dictionary an Odalisque is a female slave or concubine, which means a slave or mistress, which in itself is a degrading status. The Odalisque lies nude, her elongated back and turned head emphasizing sensuality and erotic appeal. She looks out over her shoulder, not with confrontation or agency, but with detachment, as though her sole purpose is to be observed. Her body seems to be exaggerated in some places such as the length of her spine, which suggests that aesthetic appeal was more important than realism in this painting. She doesn't seem to be presented in a way that suggests her own story or narrative but as sight for the male gaze, she invites desire as apposed to dialogue.

Venus of Urbino and La Grande Odalisque are both clear examples of how women have historically been depicted as muses, figures to be gazed at, desired, and idealized, yet ultimately passive. These are women who lack narrative subjectivity and action; their bodies are presented as visual objects of desire, posed not for themselves but merely for the pleasure of the male viewer. Both in Titan and Ingres' work the woman's body is not shown as that of an individual with a voice or inner life, but as a work of art which has been perfected, commodified, and silenced.

Objectification

Objectification in art refers to the process by which individuals, particularly women, are reduced to bodies, body parts, or aesthetic forms for others' use or pleasure. Objectification can also be described as involving instrumentality as is outlined by Martha Nussbaum in her essay entitled *Objectification* "Instrumentality: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes". (Nussbaum 1995) This idea implies that the "object" is represented in such a way that suggests a denial of autonomy and even ownership of their own body. These concepts are deeply embedded in how the female form has been portrayed in painting, sculpture, and, more recently, photography and film.

In Laura Mulvey's seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* she introduces the "male gaze" as a structuring force in cinema that positions women as objects of visual pleasure. "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." (Mulvey, 2015) This quote shows that visual pleasure in film is shaped by gender roles. Women are often shown mainly to please men's desire to look, rather than to drive the story. Female characters usually lack power and are reduced to decorative roles that support male characters or their journeys. Mulvey's theory reveals how film reflects and supports wider gender inequality, and her work still influences how we think about the objectification of women in both old and new visual media.

Feminist artists such as Hannah Wilke sought to challenge the dynamic of the objectification of women in art through their practices. Wilke used self-portraits which turned seemed to work to reclaim her body as her own and reveal how staged femininity is in visual art. Her work *Starification Object Series* perfectly encapsulates this; here she poses nude, in glamorous pin-up style photographs while small chewing-gum sculptures shaped like vulvas are stuck to her skin. This work insults conventional beauty imagery by presenting symbols of female sexuality in a way that seems unsettling or unnecessarily exaggerated, which in turn forces the viewer to confront their discomfort. Wilkes work is striking as it simultaneously inhabits the role of the desirable, beautiful woman posed for the male gaze, while also working to disturb the idea of objectification of women. She challenges these ideals by turning the object into the subject, which in turn is a form of self-objectification. This raises the question of if self-objectification can be a form of empowerment, it also bring to light a question of if reclaiming the image from the objectification can undo the centuries of visual violence that has taken place.



Figure 3

Wilke herself says about this work “I chose gum because it’s the perfect metaphor for the American woman— chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece,” (Museo Jumex, 2025) This speaks of the how women particularly in American consumer culture are treated as mere disposable objects of desire. The comparison used here of women to chewing gum is striking as it describes women as being pleasurable in the moment, but when ultimately used up to the desire of the consumer they are discarded and disposed of which in turn strips their value from them. This metaphor is a terrifying one which hits slightly too close to home in today’s culture which objectifies women’s bodies and identities, reducing them to temporary sources of pleasure or utility. Her choice of chewing gum is also a hard hitting metaphor as it is a mass-produced, cheap product that works to further reduce women to disposable commodities used as objects for pleasure, it also adds a layer of implication of repeatability and interchangeability, suggesting that women are often consumed without any consideration to their individuality, autonomy or long-term worth.

Altogether, these ideas and artistic responses show how deeply rooted objectification is in visual culture. From the theories of Nussbaum and Mulvey to the bold work of feminist artists like Wilke, it’s clear that objectification is not just about how women are shown in art, it reflects bigger systems of power, control, and inequality. Wilke’s work, in particular, shows how art can both reveal and challenge these issues. By using exaggerated symbols of beauty and sexuality, she makes viewers confront how women’s bodies are often treated as things to be consumed.

Commodification

Where objectification turns women into images, commodification transforms those images into commodities. In capitalist culture, beauty is treated like a form of currency, and the female body becomes a key source of value. The way women are made into aesthetic objects has long been linked to economic systems, this ideal dates back to commissioned portraits in aristocratic Europe and continues all the way to today's influencer culture. In advertising, the commodification of the female is clearly seen, the ideals formed in fine art are transformed into modern day roles which collaborate to become advertising. The muse seen in art becomes the model and the subject becomes a sales pitch, the image of a woman is no longer just an aesthetic for pleasure, it becomes functional for the capitalist society. Her function is to seduce, entice and sell, this is where the idea of the male gaze and the logic of capitalism meet.



Figure 4

The Tom Ford "For Men" (2007) advertisement is a stark, modern example of how the commodification of women in advertising mirrors long-standing practices in the history of art, particularly through a male gaze lens. This advert depicts a woman's oiled body with a perfume bottle seductively placed between her legs and between her breasts. The most poignant part of this image is the cropping out of the woman's face, by the composition of these images it is clear that this was a deliberate conceptual choice which reinforces the idea that women are commodified as objects for the success of a brand. The most sickening part of this advert to me is how the woman's body is used as a platform to present the product, a literal surface to sell the product off of. This choice of framing seems to work to erase her identity and reduce her to purely a sexualised body part. This echoes Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze", where women in media are often depicted for male

pleasure and visual consumption, not as active subjects with control over their own image. (Mulvey, 2015) Just like many famous nude paintings in art history, like those discussed previously in this essay, the woman depicted in this perfume advertisement is being displayed not as herself but as something to be looked at and possessed. The framing of this image appears to dehumanise her by stripping away her personality, emotion and autonomy and turning her into a visual tool, this links back to the previously discussed point made by Martha Nussbaum about women being used as tools (Nussbaum 1995). The positioning of the bottle in relation to the woman's body also seems to suggest that this product is not just a perfume but a promise of access to the female body and sexual reward, this idea fits into the capitalist tradition of commodifying women as both marketing tools and as implied rewards.

A feminist art collective known for their bold activism, the Guerrilla Girls use anonymity, comedy, and protest to directly challenge the commodification of women in the art world. Their 1989 poster "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" directly critiques how women's bodies are used as visual commodities in art institutions.



Figure 5

This poster includes an adapted version of Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* where the muses' head is replaced by a gorilla mask. Below her, bold text reads: "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female." By recontextualizing a classical image of an objectified, commodified woman and pairing it with a shocking statistic, the Guerrilla Girls expose how the female form has been continually commodified, not only in advertising like the Tom Ford example, but across centuries of art history. Their use of

satire, visual appropriation, and bold graphic design turns the language of advertising against itself, challenging viewers to question why women's bodies are so often displayed as consumable objects. In contrast to the Tom Ford ad, which reflects the logic of commodification, the Guerrilla Girls' work disrupts it highlighting the structures of exclusion and exploitation that still underpin both the art market and visual culture.

Conclusion

The presence of women in artwork has never been simply aesthetic but deeply political, economic and ideological. The representation of the Muse, historically admired as inspiring, actually functions to mask women's lack of authorship. Objectification is the perspective by which we see how women have been fashioned and reduced to surfaces to be looked at; through commodification we understand how those surfaces have been fashioned into things to be consumed.

Understanding how objectification, commodification, and the idea of the muse link gives us the tools to examine not only how women have been perceived in art, but how we might see differently. The challenge going forward is to create images that do not replicate these inherited gazes but question and transform them. This calls for new approaches in both theory and practice, theory that recognises women not as subjects of consumption, but as agents of vision and creation.

My concluding question that I have chosen based off of this essay is - **How has the role of the female muse historically contributed to the objectification of women in Western visual art?**

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