

# Judith with the head of holofernes by jan massys critical thinking example

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Jan Massys was a famous and very talented artiste in the 16th century who was known for his paintings on landscapes, historical themes and genre scenes. Born in 1509 to a prominent painter in Antwerp, Jan Massys grew into a famous artiste who fancied paintings depicting nudes with historical themes. Being a student of his father, Massys learnt and painted like his father until he was exiled due to their family's religious beliefs which were not welcomed in Antwerp.

Paintings and painters and other artistes were highly celebrated in the renaissance periods where art was used for various reasons. It was used mostly for religious purposes where images of godly beings were painted or sculptured in churches, public places and also in government buildings. Massys being a renowned painter and a master in the guild of Antwerp in 1531 gained his space in the list of great painters in history.

Like many artistes, their views on conventional issues like religion, politics and philosophical understandings were different. In fact, the Massys family was constantly on the run for their religious beliefs. He however, earned a space when he returned back from exile in 1555, where he adopted eroticism, sexualized depiction and nude females in his later works. He also brought out images of the Old Testament stories surrounding figures like Bathsheba, Susanna and Judith.

## **Judith with the Head of Holofernes**

This painting is a classical identity of Massys's style of painting bordering on history and sexualized themes. The painting on Judith with the Head of Holofernes stunningly shows Judith holding decapitated head of Holofernes. In the Old Testament stories, Judith managed to lure Holofernes, the

Babylonian army general using her beauty. Holofernes would have led his troops to destroy the Israelites and Judith had to use Holofernes' wild desires of her. Judith was able to behead Holofernes while he passed out in his intoxication with wine (de, Capoa 112).

The painting by Massys was a deviation from the conventional depiction of women. Most paintings on women during those times did not sexualize or erotize the underlying themes. However, in Massys's painting on Judith beguiling style of conquering the enemies of Israelites is laced with sensual themes and sexualizing of the women. Although there were many paintings later on the story of Judith seducing and cutting off his head, Massys's work is unique in the sense that his work on Judith sexualized was among the first ones. Most of the work on Judith and women generally drawn from the Old Testament were not explicit and that might explain why Massys may have been exiled for somewhat having such ideas as nude paintings of Old Testament figures, especially women.

## **How history is changing the way I view the painting by Massys**

Understanding on the history has profound effect on how I perceive the painting. Having some knowledge on the Old Testament, specifically about women, war, evil or wicked men and women, certainly shapes the view held towards the painting by Massys. The history as seen in the Old Testament literature does not explicitly depict women as violent as depicted in the painting (O'Reilly, Wenda, and Kravitz 89). Therefore, the depiction of women as violent and wicked in their quest to achieve their goals somewhat distorts the balance of understanding of the ancient way of life. The painting

also gives a totally different opinion about the role of women when it comes to leadership and war. Men dominated the scenes in the past and women only supported men but not from the violent approach expounded by the painting of Judith holding the head of Holofernes.

### **The dominant feelings, new insights on the Renaissance art and comparison with other works**

The dominant feelings ignited by the painting are those of violence, wickedness and seduction. The blend between beauty, sexualization, violence and bravery come across as dominant feelings as seen in the painting. This is evidenced by symbolism in the painting suggesting that women used their beauty to lay trap on their enemies for just and evil reasons.

In the modern and current settings, the painting is consistent with modern day use of sex and beauty to achieve various means by some women. It also relates with the use of women in criminal activities where beautiful women are used as snares by people seeking to avenge or just commit crimes (O'Reilly, Wenda, and Kravitz 89). Beauty is used largely as a smokescreen that conceals the ulterior motive in a move. Sex as strongly used by Massys to attract attention and criticism is also used in modern day marketing and communication.

The painting further shows how far and deep artistes had gone to express themselves, but largely to the extent of their connection with the past and early history. The use of Bible or Old Testament rich history is a sign of greater knowledge about history and influence of Christianity. It however did not deny artistes the freedom to use sexual images to express their

thoughts, despite conservative nature of the society. There are also strong similarities between Massys' work and other renaissance work. Most of the works were nudes and borrowed heavily from the Old Testament.

## **Works Cited**

de, Capoa C. Old Testament Figures in Art. Santa Monica, Calif: Getty publishing, 2003. Print.

O'Reilly, Wenda B, and Erin Kravitz. The Renaissance Art Book: Discover Thirty Glorious Masterpieces by Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Fra Angelico, Botticelli. Palo Alto, CA: Birdcage Books, 2000. Print.