

The gaze a critical of the female figure in art and advertising

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Introduction

Women have often been observed in society as being different from a man. A man's presence is seen as being a powerful force; whereas a woman's presence has been depicted as being a physical emanation, a kind of heat. It has been said that from a young age a woman has been taught to constantly watch her every move, whether it be her walking across a room, or whilst weeping at the death of a loved one.

To be born a woman was said to have been born within a confined space, or into the keeping of a man. Throughout history men have always surveyed a woman before they considered treating them. Consequently how a man treats a woman can be determined by many things, for instance if a woman is to throw a glass on the floor, this is how she expresses her anger towards a situation and how she would like it to be perceived by others, yet if a man was to do the same this would be read as an expression of his anger. As John Berger states in 'Ways of Seeing' (P. 47) Men act and women appear. Men look at women.

Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women themselves. "The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed is female. Thus she turns herself into an object and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (John Berger 'Ways of Seeing' Page. 47) Chapter 1 History of 'The Nude' within European oil Paintings In the history of European oil painting it has been said that women were known for being the primary and

ever-recurring subject. In the subject of women they were best known for being painted in the nude.

It is said that the first nudes to have been depicted in the history of art was that of Adam and Eve. John Berger has stated (P. 47) that is was worth mentioning the story of Adam and Eve as told in Genesis: ' And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together and made themselves aprons....

And the Lord God called unto the man and said unto him, " Where are thou? " And he said, " I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.... Unto the woman God said, " I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee" What is found striking about this particular story is how Adam and Eve become aware of each other's nakedness the exact moment they take a bite of the forbidden fruit, as a result of this they saw one another in a completely different way.

Nakedness was created in the mind of the beholder. What is also striking about this story is how the woman is blamed and made to suffer by being made to serve the man. As the traditions of paintings become more secular, other themes are offered up as an opportunity for painting nudes. But in all

of them there remains the fact that the subject (a woman) is all too aware of being watched by the spectator. ' She is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her. ' (John Berger ' Ways of Seeing. Page. 50) Chapter 2
Susannah and the Elders

Susanna and the Elders was one of the most popular images of the sixteenth century, these pieces were taken from the Old Testament story of Susanna and the Elders. The images that were done of Susanna and the Elders were depicted from specific passages from the 13th Chapter of the book of Daniel. Unlike most versions of Susanna and the Elders, the Schonborn painting presents the central confrontation between the main characters, the exact moment within the story when the Elders return to the garden to seduce Susanna. Mary Garrard (" Artemisia and Susanna", *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Norma Broude and Mary D.

Garrard, eds. , pp. 146-171) had this to say on her account of these paintings: Few artistic themes have offered so satisfying an opportunity for legitimized voyeurism as Susanna and the Elders. The subject was taken up by relish by artists from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries as an opportunity to display the female nude, in much the same spirit that such themes as Danae or Lucretia were approached, but with the added advantage that the nude's erotic could be heightened by the presence of two lecherous old men, whose inclusion was both iconographically justified and pornographically effective. The story of Susanna and the Elders is seen as a remarkable testament of the man's ego, a biblical theme of the exemplum of a female's chastity which shows the celebration of sexual opportunity. Or as

Max Rooses enthusiastically described Ruben's version of the story as a "gallant enterprise mounted by two adventures". Peter Paul Rubens, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1636-40 Griselda Pollock (*Differencing the Canon*, p. 105) states the following on the subject of *Susanna and the Elder's*. "The biblical story of *Susanna and the*

Elders tells of a young married Jewish woman living in Babylon during the first exile of the Jewish people (after 586 BCE.). *Susanna* is bathing in her garden. She sends her two maids into the house to fetch oil and perfumes for her bath. Two lecherous elders of the community spy on her, conspiring to force her to submit to them sexually. They threaten her that, if she refuses, they will denounce her of adultery with another man, adultery being, according to ancient Jewish law, a capital crime for women.

Susanna refuses, preferring the fate of death to the sin they propose. She is then falsely accused by the elders and condemned to death. Daniel, of leonine fame, vindicates *Susanna* by exposing the elders' mendacity. Interrogating them separately, he asks them under which tree *Susanna* committed adultery. Each names a different kind of tree. They are then executed for the crime of false witness. " This story is seen as a complex narrative of sexual desire and visual temptation.

During the Renaissance the focus of the woman's nakedness while bathing is exposed to a lecherous conspiracy which emphasized the sexual, voyeuristic and visually violating aspects of the theme, while at the same time providing a biblical and even a theological justification of the painting as an erotic female nude, a genre that was emerging in this period, shifting the focus of

the female nude from its traditional association with truth towards a more modern signification of desire and its privileged visuality.

Garrard and Pollock's focus on the subject of Susanna and the Elders is of a painting based on the same subject by Artemisia Gentileschi. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610. In one of the many versions of *Susanna and the Elders* by Tintoretto, Susanna is seen looking at herself in the mirror. In turn she becomes the spectator herself. Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1555-56. Mary Garrard Mary Garrard ("Artemisia and Susanna", *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Norma Broude and Mary D.

Garrard, eds. , pp. 149-150) presented the following on Tintoretto's painting of *Susanna* stating: "Tintoretto, whose adventurers stage their advance in a manner more sneaky than bold, nonetheless offers a representative depiction of the theme in his emphasis upon Susanna's voluptuous body and upon the Elders' ingenuity in getting a closer look at it." Chapter 3 The Vanity of Women The Mirror was often used within paintings to show the vanity of women. The moralizing, however, was seen as being quite hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoy looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting 'Vanity', thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure". (John Berger, 'Ways of Seeing', P. 51) The main function of the mirror was to make the woman notice herself and see what men see her as, a sight. It is a well-known fact that some paintings do include a male lover. However, the woman's attention isn't always directed straight at him.

The woman is usually panting looking away from the man or she is seen looking out of the painting supposedly looking towards her true love, or in this case the spectator-owner. In one instance of this type of theme is that of Lely's painting titled 'Nell Gwynne' at painting done especially for the king of that time. In this piece it is clear that the woman is looking passively out of the painting at the spectator, in this case the spectator turns out to be the king. However, Nell's nakedness was not the expression of her own feelings, but instead was the sign of her submission to the king's demands. Chapter 4 Helene Fourment in a Fur Coat

One painting that was found to be particularly fascinating was that of Ruben's young second wife, who he had happily married even though he was, at the time, quite old. Rubens 'Helene Fourment in a Fur Coat' 1577-1640 In this piece we see Ruben's wife in the mist of turning, as she does her fur coat begins to gradually slip off her shoulders. It is clear that if she continues with what she is doing she will not remain covered for very much longer. As her body faces us, even if it isn't full frontal, it is shown as being a well experienced body. Her appearance has, in the eye of the painter, been altered by his subjectivity.

As John Berger ('Ways of Seeing', P. 61) describes 'There is a displacement sideways of about nine inches'. If looked at closely it is easy to work out that her thighs, where they are meant to join up with her hips, are seen to be at least a couple of inches apart from the left side of her body. Conclusion The ways of seeing a woman and the way they are presented within a painting have not changed. Women were depicted as being different from men, not

because of the difference between feminism and masculinity, but because the spectator is often assumed to be a man and a painting of a naked woman were designed to flatter him. In the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity". (John Berger, ' Ways of Seeing', P. 63) In the end what was found was quite remarkable and found that women were often observed in society as being different from a man. It just goes to show that even in paintings women will always be seen as objects and nothing more.

Bibliography

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