

The female form in art



I believe Art is the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination taking form. This is, typically in the visual Arts such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or their ability to provoke a reaction. Art is also evidence of history and a reflection of the people in it, for example my theme; how women have been portrayed, in Art, over the years. As the world has developed and changed, Art has been one approach of recording this. It's only been recently that Art has been separated from being just a chronicling of man's life, to being in a constant state of flux ever changing.

Throughout this constantly changing subject, which we loosely refer to as 'Art', I believe there has been one constant element; The Female form. Throughout the centuries the female form has dominated across many different disciplines, this is what I am going to investigate and why the women's body has been appreciated and recorded by artists so thoroughly. The Art world has clearly enjoyed the curves, elegance and beauty of the female form, more than that of the male. This is clearly evident in the sheer volume of work that has been produced. Are women more valued as they have the power to produce? All of this has encouraged me to research further into my chosen theme to find out why the female figure has been so popular and still is a focus of so many artists.

For my first chapter I've chosen to study the work "The Birth of Venus" by Botticelli. This is because of Venus' Goddess like presentation and sense of importance that expresses the significance of women.

For my second chapter I'm going to look at Edouard Manet's wonderful pieces that portray women in all their beauty. "Olympia" is one of them; it is very similar to the work of Botticelli with the strong appearance of prominence though it was set in far more casual scenery.

My third chapter I propose to compare Utamaro Kitagawa's Japanese work with that of some of Degas' just to understand how women are portrayed in two very different cultures. Looking at some of the similarities and differences such as the type of media and techniques that are used.

My final chapter I will be looking at the work of Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville to see how the modern world interprets women in a more naturalistic verging on ugly approach.

Wherever the female form has been placed under scrutiny by artists around the world I will be searching for the common thread that links the female form as a thing of artistic and natural beauty.

Chapter 1-Goddess Beauty

The Birth of Venus (1486).

Sandro Botticelli was an Italian painter of the early renaissance, born in 1445 and died in 1510. During his life time he became an apprentice and in 1470 he went on to get his own workshop to create his work which at this early stage was produced with a conception of the figure as if seen in low relief, drawn with clear contours and reducing strong contrasts of light and shadow which would advance the fully modelled forms. The inspiration of Gothic

realism in these paintings is tempered by Botticelli's study of the antique still creating a fascinating perception of myth and poetry.

This image is of the mythological goddess of love as a perfect woman figure being doted over by other subjects is a very mythical statement, her purpose was to arouse Humans to physical love or intellectually inspire the love in them.

On Venus' right is Zephyrus, God of Winds, he carries with him the gentle breeze Aura and together they blow the Goddess of Love ashore. The Horae, Goddess of the Seasons, waits to receive Venus and spreads out a flower covered robe in readiness for the Love Goddess' arrival. I appreciate how it illustrates Roman Mythology rather than a biblical matter and show a great deal of symbolism of the coming spring and of Venus' chaste appearance.

The pure detail of this painting expresses so much elegance and beauty of this mythical story, with Venus being nude (which is very rare in early art as it was seen as unruly thing to behold, though in this situation it is vastly acceptable as she is a mythical figure) it shows her in all her magnificence with superb ginger hair that flows down her proportioned, starkly white body that covers certain areas. Considering the techniques Botticelli has used, Venus is portrayed, larger than life, deliberately gaining the viewer's immediate attention.

Enhancing this, the artist streams light from a hidden sun brightening Venus' colourless physique creating some obvious tone he also exaggerates the figures proportions and flexibility that potentially adds to the mystifying atmosphere. Botticelli complements to the goddess's femininity by

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illuminating her with flushed cheeks, rosy lips, and bright eyes. Extending her innocence further the artist places her right arm over her breast and the left over her pubic area, creating the illusion of embarrassment.

Chapter 2-Realistic Beauty

“ Olympia” 1863

Édouard Manet was a French painter of the 19th century. He was one of the first artists in that era to approach modern life subjects. He was also very well known in the changeover from realism to impressionism and was obsessed with emulating the old masters in the Louvre.

This painting is highly influenced by “ Titian - The Venus of Urbino, 1538” is also reminiscent of Francisco Goya's painting, The Nude Maja (1800). After Manet's previous painting ‘ Luncheon on the grass’ which caused a disagreement, ‘ Olympia’ instigated an even bigger up-roar due to her confrontational gaze and the various items that indicated that she was a courtesan.

For example the orchid in her hair, the gold bracelet and pearl earrings which all symbolize wealth and sensuality also there is a black cat perched at the end of her bed that symbolizes prostitution whereas in Titian's painting there is a dog instead that portrays fidelity. The black servant in the background presents the courtesan with a sheaf of flowers from a male client this indicates that she is of a servant rank; also her positioning behind makes her look less significant as though she's almost blended in, the arrangement

of the courtesan also shows no acknowledgment for her servant but of the viewer.

It's harsh but the blending in of the servant represents the manner in which they were treated in that period of time. Her pale flesh contrasts sharply against the dark greens and blacks of the background with the white linen and blankets lifting her out into the dominant focus, her added accessories enhance colour into her washed-out flesh. Olympia is neither mystified nor romanticized. She is the real life character who leads a life of certain nature common and well understood by the modern onlooker. Manet painted a real woman, whose nakedness is revealed in all its brutality by the harsh light, this is what makes her the focus of this painting, whether she was a prostitute or not there's still a strong element of beauty and elegance.

Chapter 3-Culture Beauty

“ Bijin Combing Her Hair” 1750-1806

Utamaro Kitagawa's was a Japanese print maker and painter who is considered the best artists of woodblock prints. He is well known for composing studies of Women, known as Bijinga. This image in all its simplicity has a stunning effect of purity and organisation. For the Japanese, the daily ritual of getting ready is of significance to them, important enough for someone to want to capture that particular moment of this beautiful woman combing her long, black hair that contrasts sharply with her pure, pale skin. The use of woodblock is what makes this painting so solid and encourages the artist away from creating a busy, unneeded background generating a complete focus on the woman and her beauty. By the

expression of concentration on this woman's face shows how much she is caring for her appearance as she separates her hair into sections to gently comb away.

“ Woman Combing Her Hair” 1886

Edgar Degas was a French painter famous for his work in sculpture, painting, printmaking and drawing. He is considered one of the creators of impressionism even though he rejects the term and was preferred to be called a realist. Degas also assimilated two major influences into his mature style - English art and Japanese prints. The figure became his primary subject and he began to draw and paint women drying themselves with towels, combing their hair, and bathing, his fascination with them in their public and private lives which is echoed in the prevalence of female subjects in Japanese woodblock imagery.

The beauty in this image is defined through the woman's perfectly shaped back and the tones that add a curvaceous affect. The fact her face is turned away from the viewer makes you focus solely on her shape and casual positioning that shows no care for the fact she's being painted or even looked at. The method in which she is combing her hair is at a totally diverse angle to how you'd expect someone to comb their hair though this complements a fine angle along with the shape of her back.

Chapter 4-Ugly Beauty

" Branded"

Jenny Saville is a contemporary British painter, best known as one of the Young British Artists. She is also known for her large scale painted depictions of naked women. Saville has devoted her career to traditional figurative oil painting. Her painterly style has been compared to that of Lucian Freud.

Saville fights society's ideal of the perfect body by showing her own enlarged and distorted body, which becomes the opposite of the skin and bones we see on the covers of magazines. In many paintings, she uses her own head and face and the body of an obese woman. Her paintings are usually larger than life to give an impression of a huge figure. They are strongly pigmented and give a highly sensual impression of the surface of the skin as well as the mass of the body. She sometimes adds marks onto the body, such as white "target" rings which symbolize plastic surgery lines. This image is full of emotion, the woman's face is almost hidden, and the camera angle is distorting the whole figure making her head the smallest part of her.

She is holding onto her flesh, which is what a lot of women and men do when they look in the mirror and see extra flesh. I also love how words have been scraped away from the top layer of paint as though to label her. Saville's delicate yet grotesque way of painting creates the delusion that the body is made of meat or of a doughy element; this is indicated by some blue areas amongst the array of pink shades and dark shadows. It's not the nudity that shocks the viewer but the sheer intensity of the tones and shadows in which create an almost animalistic object of size.

“ Woman asleep on the floor 2”

Lucian Freud was a British painter. Known chiefly for his thickly impacted portrait and figure paintings, he was widely considered the pre-eminent British artist of his time. His works are renowned for their psychological penetration, and for their disturbing scrutiny of the relationship between artist and model. If this painting did not state that this woman was asleep the pure detail would trick me to think that this individual has died, saying that, the tones clearly classifies the skinny, unhealthy physique of that of a woman who are usually portrayed in a glowing, beautiful form. The green sheets underneath add to the morbid, dirty approach and almost blend into the woman herself. The main focus isn't on the woman but of her body as her head is placed insignificantly, at the top of the image making you truly look at her position and helpless atmosphere.