

The fit in with the  
beauty standards of



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The purpose of this essay is to gain a better understanding of how throughout history the male gaze has impacted the roles of women, varying from different cultures and social backgrounds.

Illustration 1 created by Jacob Jordaens in 1653, titled *Susanna and the Elders*, has a much deeper story behind it. Two old judges threatened Susanna one day, whilst she bathed in the gardens. She was told if she didn't surrender herself to them, that they would accuse her of adultery with a young man, a sentence that could result in death. Eventually Susanna was cleared by the help of Daniel and the two were exposed as criminals. This story is much favoured in the history of religious Art. (Wikipedia, 2017) "Included in the Book of Daniel featured in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches" the story has been in many pieces of Art, perceiving the story in multiple ways. Focusing on the theme of the male gaze, (Cartright & Sturken, 2009) has spoken about femininity and how social roles and stereotypes were composed by men. "Most collectors of art were men, and the primary viewing audience of art was composed overwhelmingly of men.

"You can see in the image of Susannah she looks like she is almost playing up to the male audience. She has also been illustrated to fit in with the beauty standards of that time, once again constructed by men, for men to look at. Another thing that stands out in the image is the way the woman communicates to the reader, predominantly a man looking at the image.

Used in advertisements to this day, particularly fashion ones, where a woman gazes out to the audience. (Cartright & Sturken, 2009). "Ironically, this can

have the effect of making the man in the picture appear to be a mere prop, with no agency.

“ This could be to make the man looking at the image to feel connected to the woman, as if she is playing up to the male gaze and tending to his needs. Laura Mulvey (Cartright & Sturken, 2009) analysed Hollywood cinema and how it, in fact, plays up to the gaze, positioning women in suggestive positions and situations. “ The term scopophilia refers to pleasure in looking and exhibitionism- taking sexual pleasure in being looked at.

” This could fit in well with the illustration of Susannah as painted by males, they are trying to appeal to an audience that want to stare and enjoy looking at her body. Other illustrations in history have focused on the story of Susannah and the Elders. Many artists showed Susannah as playing up to the male gaze of the two elders and is often shown in a seductive manner as if it shows that she is willingly inviting the attention. In ways such as combing her hair or admiring her reflection in the mirror. However, many of the artists throughout history were male and one female artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, stood out for a particular reason, as her illustrations depicted a different Susannah. Rather than playing up to the attention, she twists away from them, looking almost disgusted. I think the female view of the story is a very different one as she shows that women do not enjoy the male gaze and if anything, try to avoid it.

Obviously some other aspects come into play as ideas of beauty, attention and gender roles differed from culture to culture. As Jordaens was Dutch and Gentileschi was Italian, their genders may not have been the only influences

on the male gaze and how women react to it. Another theme linking to the illustration of Susannah and the Elders is how we ourselves negotiate the meaning of an image. (Cartright & Sturken, 2009). “ For Saussure, signifier is the entity that represents, and sign is the combination of the signifier and what it means.” The first image of Susannah seems as if she is being watched by two men whilst she bathes, however the deeper meaning behind it would be the real story. The story plays on the idea of a damsel in distress.

A young woman in need of help with a heroic man who comes to save her. A very cliché outlook, furthermore adds to how gender is constructed throughout history and was deemed as the woman will always need saving and the man will come to her aid. Focusing on the social side of the image, the expectations of beauty were entirely different in the 16th century. A voluptuous figure was deemed attractive compared to nowadays where there is a social stigma around being plus sized. The ideals of beauty also differed all around the World, as without technology there was less communication and therefore less influence from “ role models” who today impact what is seen as beautiful.

This image originated from Belgium and their culture idolized bigger women. Although women today may not want to appear this way, there are some aspects from 16th century culture that influence them today. Corsets are still used to maintain a slim waist, whilst enhancing shape and figure. In conclusion, I think that the illustrations of Susannah and the Elders, perfectly depicts the male gaze and how male artists would promote and thrive off the idea of a woman being looked at. Throughout history, women have been the object and men have been the spectators. This forced women into roles of a

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stereotypical nature, such as sticking to the kitchen and serving their husbands needs.

Illustrations like these reinforced the gender roles and along with the male gaze, women were made to feel like they had no other choice but to oblige. Today, these roles have somewhat disappeared and along with Feminist movements, becoming more equal.