

Representation of womanhood in baroque art



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Representation of Womanhood in Baroque Art:

An Analysis of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holoferne s* and Johannes Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance*

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* is one of a series of paintings completed in the years after she went through the difficult task of bringing her rapist to trial, in an era when such a thing was essentially unheard of. Johannes Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* is a more typical depiction of what was expected of women of the era. She was expected to be righteous, pious, and balanced, both in her public and private life. While both paintings are from the Baroque era, with similar formal qualities in regard to use of light and composition, each painting takes a different stand on the meaning of womanhood in the 17th century.

Both paintings make great use of light to both draw attention to the main subjects as well as to help balance their composition. Gentileschi's *Judith* is an example of the use of tenebrism, a technique in which shadows are used to draw attention to the focal point of the painting, while creating a sense of depth in the darkened background. The light from the candle illuminates the scene, drawing our attention to the expressions on their faces. They are waiting to be sure that they are safe and can now escape after having accomplished their goal - the beheading of Holofernes. This use of light adds to the feeling of drama and heightened intensity in the scene. Vermeer's *Woman* makes use of contrasting areas of dark and light around the subject that help to underscore the push and pull between the material and spiritual worlds felt by Vermeer and his contemporaries (" National Gallery of Art").

The use of light also helps to bring balance to an otherwise asymmetrical composition.

Gentileschi's *Judith* depicts a biblical scene. The book of Judith is not canon in the *Bible* we know today but is a subject that has been reflected on by many of the artists who preceded her. Gentileschi's take on the subject comes across as secular. For Gentileschi, painting the subject matter of Judith and Holofernes was a cathartic exercise, and this can be seen in the treatment of Judith as a strong, determined woman. Vermeer's *Woman* depicts an instance in the woman's private life that, while largely secular, is greatly influenced by the presence of religion, and her faith. In the background of the scene, there is a framed painting of *The Last Judgment*, one of Michelangelo's frescos from the Sistine Chapel. It hangs there as a reminder to the woman that the choices she makes in life will greatly impact what happens to her in the afterlife. She is looking at her jewelry, which represents the material life she has, but the painting is there in the background to serve as a reminder that her spiritual life is just as important. Both works have religious as well as secular elements to them.

Women are the focus of both paintings, which was less typical for the male dominated art world of the era. In the Baroque period, Gentileschi was one of a few women artists to create in her works "...a distinctive view of female artistic perspective at the time," promoting "a more assertive image of the woman(" Gender in Art")," as she did in *Judith* . The depiction of woman as pious, modest, and faithful, as in Vermeer's *Woman* , was much more typical and acceptable. Women were supposed to find strength in their faith and religion, not in their own self-determination, as in *Judith*. Gentileschi's

experiences as a woman were greatly influential to her work, as is evidenced here. While both works feature women, the ways in which they do so differ greatly.

While both paintings were done in the Baroque period (1600-1750), the differences in the use of color and focus evoke very different phenomenological responses. *Judith* gives a sense of anxiety and foreboding, while *Woman* gives a more serene, calming feeling. Although there is no blood in the depiction of the scene in *Judith*, the deep red in the fabric draped over the upper right corner of the canvas evokes the bloodshed that took place just before the escape attempt by Judith and her maidservant. The color red is often used to symbolize anger and violence and is likely used to represent the rage Gentileschi felt towards her rapist and the aftermath of the trial. The focus of the painting is sharp, placing emphasis on the danger they face. *Woman* shows an aura of calm and serenity, created by the cool color palette and soft focus of the subject. The color blue, found throughout the work, is often used to symbolize piety and faith, with dark blue specifically representing knowledge (“Color Wheel”) It is clear that this is Vermeer’s intention, to depict the ideal woman – pious and faithful, ready for the better things the afterlife has to offer her.

Both Gentileschi’s *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* and Vermeer’s *Woman holding a Balance* depict 17th century women, while sharing the use of asymmetrical composition and light to draw attention to their subjects. More importantly, they present differing ideas of womanhood and feminine strength from a time when the only opinions of importance

came from men. Vermeer shows the ideal of feminine strength in the 17th century. Religious and modest, with a balanced understanding of the material and spiritual worlds. Gentileschi provides a look at what was probably found more in the innerworkings of women of the time. She was fed up with not only the way that men treated women, but also with the fact that they were often rewarded for it. One work gives a glimpse into what was expected of women at the time, while the other fought to break with those ideals altogether.

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Works Cited

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