

Research point: Does the female nude exploit women for male gratification?

For this research point I must consider whether the female nude exploits women for male gratification? Or does it depend on the context? What does a feminine critique add to the interpretation of a female nude?

Find out how women artists have portrayed other women throughout the centuries, for example in mythological paintings. How are women artists presenting female subjects today?

In my opinion the female nude does not exploit women for male gratification as it depends on the context in which the female nude is being portrayed. For example in *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, by Edouard Manet the female figure although nude is tastefully positioned so as to present us with a side view of her figure. The contrast between her and the surrounding figures is marked, not only by the strong difference in tonal values but also by her absence of clothes. The painting shares strong similarities with *Le Concert champêtre*, by Titian, which also features two nude women situated in a landscape alongside two fully clothed men.

The two images would have scandalised the public at the time as respectable young ladies were expected to be accompanied by a dowager or a suitable chaperon to these sorts of events. Otherwise their reputations would have been at stake. So both artists are intimating that the women they are portraying are in fact prostitutes or at least highly unsuitable prospective partners.

In my view both Titian and Manet were following in a long tradition of celebrating the female form rather than exploiting it. Both artists sought to challenge themselves and present ambitious paintings to their respective audiences. It seems to me that works such as Manet's and Titian's are simply following in a long line of artists who wished to capture and beautify the female form and challenge people's conceptions of nudity in art, rather than exploit it.

Over the centuries women artists have employed a variety of creative solutions in regards to the portrayal of their gender. Some of the most interesting works are as follows:

Judith Slaying Holofernes, c.1620, oil on canvas by Artemisia Gentileschi



In *Judith Slaying Holofernes* the artist re-enacts a scene from the apocryphal book of Judith in which the heroine brutally decapitates the ancient oppressor of the Jews, the Assyrian General Holofernes in his bed.

The image is particularly gory as Gentileschi has portrayed her heroine ruthlessly stabbing the General whilst trying to avoid the subsequent profusion of blood spurting out of his head. Interestingly her figure of Judith seems totally indifferent to the scene of devastation before her and merely continues with her task.

Judith's maid is pictured behind her pinning the man to the bed whilst also holding the sack in which they will shortly place his dismembered head. The subject matter is particularly blood-thirsty and is one of her more graphic works. She is best known for her works in which women played a dominant and forceful role.

This work was purchased by the grand duke of Tuscany on the advice of Galileo, so perhaps some of her patrons shared her interest in classical art and the dominance of women?

The story of Judith has had many associations since it first appeared in the Middle Ages. Initially Judith represented virtue overcoming vice. From the Counter-reformation onwards she signified victory over sin.

Painting Color, c.1780, oil on canvas, Angelica Kauffman,

Painting Color is a significant work by Swiss-born artist Angelica Kauffman as this piece was painted as part of the ceiling decoration at the Royal Academy of Arts.

Kauffman was one of only two female founding members and was regarded highly by her peers at the Academy.

Painting Color is a part of a scheme of four oval ceiling designs which represent the essential elements of painting: colour, design, composition and genius or invention. The four canvases adorned the ceiling of the lecture room in which subsequent generations of students would be taught.

All four of the canvases are self-portraits that reflect allegorical themes. In *Color*, the artist lifts her arm in a dragging motion across the sky to create a rainbow of colours. The movement of her arm echoes that of an artist applying a daub of paint to his/her canvas. She gazes upward as if pondering which colours to apply next and clutches her palette close to her chest. The colour harmonies are particularly delightful and her vermilion drapery contrasts charmingly with the green and verdant landscape.



Meriel, n.d, oil on canvas, Ann Witheridge.

Finally, I have included an image of *Meriel* by the English artist Ann Witheridge as it is a contemporary image of a female nude by a female artist.

I admire it as it strongly as it reminds me of nudes by Titian and Giorgione, but in a far more subtle manner. The values are very soft and the highlights are used sparingly so as not to overpower the figure. The model's visage is relaxed and the environs are subtly implied. I think it is highly successful as the contrapposto suggests interesting forms whilst the artist also seems to have paid careful attention to the delicate colour notes and harmonies existing within this composition.

Conclusions

In conclusion, women artists have always had many varying ideas as to how to present both themselves and their peers in their paintings. Artemisia Gentileschi favoured a more confrontational approach that was uncompromising and appealed both to her and her patrons. Whilst Angelica Kauffman preferred a style that was classical in nature but that still allowed her to express herself on her own terms. Meanwhile Ann Witheridge, who has trained me in drawing skills, her approach follows that of the Renaissance – less allegorical but truer to reality. Ann paints from life but has learnt to embrace the styles of old and combine those with her own ideas. Her nudes are spectacular and appeal to me as I have had the pleasure to see her at work and also to learn from her as well.

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