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The Evolution of Feminism in Art

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the evolution of feminism in art, from the exaggeration of female features and the objectification and sexualization of women, to the recognition of female artists and an increase in the representation of holistic female figures. The role and portrayal of women in art are ever-evolving. Initially, women were depicted as hypersexualized versions of themselves; objects of desire, particularly for the male gaze. Despite this being the norm in the art industry at the time, some female artists like Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Cassatt, and Berthe Morisot were key figures in portraying women as human beings with ambitions, beyond merely being objects of desire. This paper discusses the importance of the emergence of female artists like Georgia O'Keeffe, Lavinia Fontana, and the Guerrilla Girls in changing the depiction of women in art. It also explores intersectionality within the artistic landscape and how art has been used as a medium of activism to overcome these inequalities. Finally, the paper highlights the evolving portrayal of the male gaze and female rage in art over the years—by both male and female artists.

Keywords: Renaissance, Male Gaze, Objectification, Intersectionality, Feminist

INTRODUCTION

Women have remained a constant presence in art for centuries. Art has long served as a powerful medium for expressing the individual mind, while also depicting the ways in which society has shaped its social structures and communities. This can be seen in the way women are portrayed in artworks, especially in comparison to other individuals, and the evolution of feminism in art over the years.

One of the earliest known artistic representations of women is the Venus figurines, which date back to the Upper Paleolithic period. These figurines emphasize on the parts of the female body that are associated with fertility and sexuality; such as large and exaggerated hips and breasts. As societies evolved, and religions became more structured, the artistic depiction of women in art expanded beyond Venus figurines, into portrayals of goddesses in various cultures. It advanced into demonstrating women as mythological figures, divine and mortal emphasizing on purity, fertility, and motherhood. Soon after, the Renaissance depicted women in more realistic ways. During this time, portraiture became very popular among queens and noblewomen reflecting their status. However, their roles in art were still largely confined to that of muses. Over time, women began to be depicted in everyday roles, reinforcing gender norms.

From the Renaissance period to now, the manner in which women are portrayed in art has significantly advanced. In earlier periods, they were often depicted in domestic or submissive roles, reflecting their expected societal position as wives, and mothers. "In people's imaginations, the goddesses in mythology have almost perfect plump images: smooth and translucent skin and perfectly proportioned features. As for women with low social status, their appearances are still attractive. However, the paintings often imply that they live and work as male's appendages." (Ma). Unlike men, who were often represented as muscular, and heroic figures, embodying ideals of physical and intellectual power. They were frequently portrayed as leaders, intellectuals, and warriors, reflecting their dominance in societal areas.

"Since Renaissance was predominantly created and celebrated by males, it was often tailored to fit their desires and depiction of a woman. Renaissance often drew inspiration from the Classical period. "During the Classical period, Greek sculpture embodied the ideals and values of the patriarchal society. This resulted in female figures that were never represented equally and instead were made to embody the societies' misogynistic view of women and their bodies.

While the male statues were nude, athletic, and heroic, the female figures were fully clothed or partially exposed, made erotic and sensual, and with the female nakedness, they were depicted as vulnerable, violated, and always enslaved to their biology.” (Persson and Eriksson). Women’s nude bodies were often objectified and made to please the “male gaze,” which is a term coined by British film scholar Laura Mulvey in the 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” “The male gaze describes a way of portraying and looking at women that empowers men while sexualizing and diminishing women.” (Vanbuskirk). The male gaze plays a major role in the objectification of women as it portrays women in a sensual manner and places them in a weaker position simply for the gratification of the male viewer. “...we’ve got minds and souls as well as hearts; ambition and talents, as well as beauty and accomplishments; and we want to live and learn as well as love and be loved. I’m sick of being told that love is all a woman is fit for! I won’t have anything to do with love till I prove that I am something beside a housekeeper and baby-tender!” (Alcott 10) is a powerful quote from Rose in Bloom by Louisa May Alcott, written in 1876, though it was later popularized by Greta Gerwig’s adaptation of *Little Women*. This quote reflects the widespread frustration of women with objectification and the lack of recognition they deserve. This parallels with the experience of many older female artists, who often struggled to gain acknowledgment and recognition for their artworks due to the art industry being a mainly male-dominated field, where only a few female artists have achieved proper recognition.

Examples of female artists who managed to surpass the barriers of male dominance in the art world include Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Cassatt, and Berthe Morisot, among many others.

“During a working career of more than forty years, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-ca. 1652) established herself as an extraordinary personality and the foremost woman painter of Italy.” (Bissell 153). She was known for defying all norms with her artworks. Despite her being born in a male-dominating world, the women in her artwork dispelling stereotypes of gender roles and were depicted as mentally, and physically strong individuals, in contrast to the artworks made in her day. An example of one such artwork by her is “*Judith Slaying Holofernes*,” which will be talked about later in the paper.



Judith Slaying Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi, 1620

Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot were key figures in breaking down barriers in impressionism. “They played pivotal roles in the professionalization of women artists, overcoming societal challenges to contribute significantly to the French Impressionist movement. As key members of the avant-garde, they faced obstacles shared by many artists of their time, especially women, in their pursuit of artistic careers. The influence of Morisot and Cassatt on the development of modernist ideals and their lasting legacies in artistic innovation are considerable and cannot be understated.” (“BERTHE MORISOT, MARY CASSATT & The Affluent Woman’s World”). Their art primarily focused on the lives of women in the late 18th and early 19th century in mostly intimate settings. Their artwork depicted women engaged in everyday, domestic settings; and a strong emphasis was also placed on motherhood with paintings like, “*Mother Berthe Holding Her Baby*” by Mary Cassatt, and “*The Cradle*” by Berthe Morisot. Both these paintings are of a mother and her child.



The Cradle, 1872



Mother Berthe Holding Her Baby by Mary Cassatt, 1900

In 1971, Linda Nochlin, an American art historian and feminist, published an essay titled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” This essay sparked the Feminist Art Movement by challenging the notion of “greatness” in art. Feminist art movement included “Art that seeks to challenge the dominance of men in both art and society, to gain recognition and equality for women artists, and question assumptions about womanhood. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist artists used a variety of mediums—including painting, performance art, and crafts historically considered “women’s work”—to make work aimed at ending sexism and oppression and exposing femininity to be a masquerade or set of poses adopted by women to conform to societal expectations.” (Marcoci). After the emergence of feminism in art, the representation of women artists increased substantially and the way in which women were represented also started to gradually change.

BEYOND THE MALE GAZE: THE IMPACT OF FEMALE ARTISTS ON ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

“The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed 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.” (Berger 51)

The emergence of female artists changed the course of art and contributed to the change in the way in which females have been represented. In recent years, women have started being represented as more holistic human beings with rich private lives rather than as objects of desire designed for the male gaze. This has played a major role in empowering women through art, and encouraging female artists to come forward and express their ideas through their artworks.

Before the rise of female artists, not only were women objectified in artworks, women artists were also marginalized from the art sphere for the longest time. In male artworks, women used to be portrayed as caricatures of themselves with exaggerated figures and enhanced sensuality. This resulted from the inscription of societal expectations and ethnic values onto women’s bodies, revealing the roles they were expected to embody; which were then reflected in the artworks created during that period of time. As aptly stated by Fiona Carson in the book “Feminist Visual Culture,” “...in the seamless trajectory of Western art history, one might be forgiven for assuming that art is the province of men and that the place of woman is in the picture, as model or muse.” (Carson and Pajaczkowska 25)

Besides the artists discussed earlier in the paper—Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Cassatt, and Berthe Morisot—I will now focus on the contributions of other prominent female artists who played a significant role in advancing feminist perspectives in art and weren’t afraid of expressing themselves through their work

A strong example of how women are getting a chance to use their voice to talk about rampant issues in today's world—like sexism, racism, among others—and using art as a medium to share their opinions to spread awareness and encourage change is the Guerrilla Girls. The Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous feminist activist group that spreads awareness about gender and racial inequality through provocative art and public interventions. They wear gorilla masks in public to keep their identities hidden and to shift the focus away from who they are to what they’re trying to convey. Their names are pseudonyms generally based on dead female artists. Members go by names such as Käthe Kollwitz, Alma Thomas, Frida Kahlo, Hannah Höch, etc. They do this to honour the legacy of different female artists who were marginalized during their time. They use bold posters with bright and vibrant colors to express their message, making them very eye-catching and hard to miss. Their posters and artworks also usually feature shocking statistics, to help spread important messages to the public. An example of a very famous poster by the Guerrilla Girls is:



Poster by the Guerrilla Girls, 1989

Another female artist that changed the trajectory of art is the one and only Georgia O'Keeffe. With her bold and vibrant colours, and abstract lines, Georgia O'Keeffe was named the “mother” of modern art in America. She soon became one of the most influential female artists of her generation, defying the expectations of women in the field of art. She challenged the manner in which femininity, chaos and natural beauty could be expressed on canvas. Her artworks mainly focused on natural subjects like flowers and landscapes, generally influenced by her surroundings and personal experiences. Many of her famous flower paintings were interpreted as representations of plants and nature as well as representations of women and their experiences as females in society; this challenged the perception of the viewers and gave these pieces space in a world that generally marginalises women. Georgia O'Keeffe will always remain an extremely influential figure in the world of art, with her unique artwork and manner of depicting important topics in her art, paving the way for future generations of female artists.



Oriental Poppies by Georgia O'Keeffe, 1928

Lastly, I will discuss the Italian painter Lavinia Fontana. She is known as one of the first professional female artists in the Italian Renaissance period, as she made a living from her artworks with commissions and more; which was incredibly rare at that time. Females also weren't allowed to paint and study the nude body, however, she managed to do so. This showcases how she pushed the boundaries of what was considered socially acceptable for women both artistically and socially. Lavinia Fontana was particularly well known for her portraiture, which not only depicted religious and mythological scenes but also portrayed women as noblewomen and scholars, with strength, grit, and intellect. She further highlighted individualism in women by painting them with books, pets, instruments, and more; depicting that women were more than just objects of desire in a male-dominated society. They were complex individuals with brains and ambitions. It was also a renowned fact that she was a mother to 11 children, while still maintaining her artistic career. Her life as a mother and a female artist earning money in a patriarchal culture exemplifies the idea that mothers can continue to work even after having children, and that women with big careers don't have to renounce their private lives for their careers.



Portrait of a Noblewoman by Lavinia Fontana, 1580

These are just a few of the female artists who have played pivotal roles in changing the way women are represented in art. Their work demonstrates just how necessary the emergence of female artists was in reshaping these portrayals. This was accomplished by depicting women as well-rounded individuals—with private lives as mothers, authors, artists, and more; and portraying them as human beings with emotions and passions. Raising awareness and challenging these barriers was especially important in surpassing the limitations and restrictions placed on women in both social and artistic aspects.

INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE ARTISTIC LANDSCAPE

“Intersectionality, in social theory, the interaction and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination affecting the daily lives of individuals, particularly women of color. The term also refers more broadly to an intellectual framework for understanding how various aspects of individual identity—including race, gender, social class, and sexuality—interact to create unique experiences of privilege or oppression.” (Samie). The term “intersectionality” was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Although the concept existed long before the word was coined, as previously discussed in earlier artworks by female artists, and as will be further explored in a similar context.

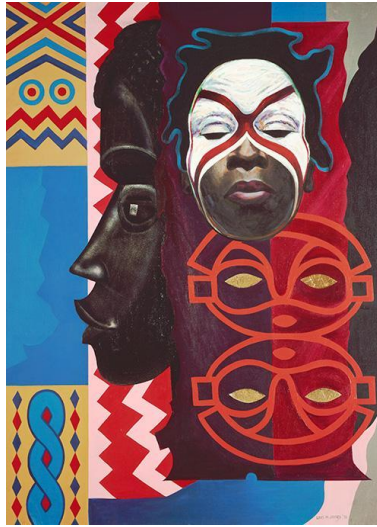
Art has been used as a medium of activism for many decades. It has been used as a tool for social, political, and artistic change all over the globe; regarding prevalent issues like racism, sexism, and more in the realm of art and politics. As previously mentioned, artists like Lavinia Fontana and Artemisia Gentileschi challenged the lack of feminism and contributed to the change of the portrayal of women in paintings—this was an act against intersectionality in the context of sexism, and it proves that intersectionality existed long before the term was coined.

Black female artists tended to be more marginalized and were more scarcely portrayed in historical artworks; these paintings mainly focused on men as gods or intellectuals, while white women, though featured less often, were usually portrayed in a sexualized manner. This led artists of the time to overlook the Black community. “Whenever black females were depicted in art, Women of colour tended to be depicted as an exoticized and hypersexualized “other,” validating racial hierarchies and stereotypes (Hooks, 1992; Mirzoeff, 2015). Such representations did not merely objectify women of colour but also marginalized their experiences and identities (Butler, 1990).” (Ankyiah and Bamfo 65)

“The Harlem Renaissance encompassed poetry and prose, painting and sculpture, jazz and swing, opera and dance. What united these diverse art forms was their realistic presentation of what it meant to be black in America, what writer Langston Hughes called an “expression of our individual dark-skinned selves,” as well as a new militancy in asserting their civil and political rights.” (“A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance”). Female artists of that time, like Loïs Mailou Jones and Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller combated racism and sexism, while also asserting and exploring their cultural identity through their artworks.

Loïs Mailou Jones’ art is a great example of intersectionality in the art sphere, as she was a black female artist in the 1930s; during which sexism and racism were quite deeply rooted in the industry. Her art explored scenes from her African roots, and also incorporated African diaspora themes. She referred to the challenges she faced as a “double handicap: being a woman and being a woman of color.” This expresses the difficulties she faced as a black female artist in the early nineties and how this hindered her ability to make it as big as her male and white counterparts in the art industry; despite her immense talent.

Her art focused on textile designs, African masks, and empowered black people, challenging the norms at that time. Her artworks could also be seen as a form of resistance—her resistance to center white subjects, and instead focusing on black subjects and black heritage.



Ubi Girl from Tai Region by Lois Mailou Jones, 1972

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller is another appreciable black, female sculptor of the Harlem Renaissance who depicted the African and African-American experience and the challenges faced by people of colour. “Anticipating themes of the Harlem Renaissance, Fuller used the figure as metaphor to represent broad themes as African-American artists and intelligentsia sought to formulate and celebrate an African-American cultural identity and express racial experience and social issues in America.” (“The Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller Collection – Danforth Art Museum and Art School”) She soon became one of the first African-American women to get global recognition as a sculptor and she used this platform to discuss important matters. Her artwork is not just art, it’s a symbol of activism; as she wasn’t one to shy away from sensitive topics like slavery, racial violence, and more. Her art told the stories that were too afraid to be told and expressed at that time—particularly of the struggles faced by black women. She portrayed black women as humans with strength, challenging the very dehumanizing stereotypes of that time.



Mother and Child by Meta Warrick Fuller, 1962

In recent years, activism has been used to confront issues like racism and sexism through the means of art. This is evident in graffiti and street art, as well as in murals and posters—like the aforementioned ones by the Guerrilla Girls. Activist art has been used to combat issues related to intersectionality for centuries and continues to do so even today, as these challenges persist. Due to the widespread nature of social media, activism through art has also become more common and more easily accessible. This type of art empowers overlooked and marginalized communities, providing them with a sense of belonging. People now, more than ever, are ready to speak up and express their beliefs; this has led to a rise in the emergence of female artists, and even male artists that express their thoughts on intersectionality through their art, advocating in support of females.

FEMALE RAGE VS. MALE GAZE

As discussed earlier, the painting “Judith Slaying Holofernes” by Artemisia Gentileschi was painted in the early Baroque period (1612-1613). “Judith Slaying Holofernes illustrates a biblical scene from the Book of Judith. When the mighty warlord Holofernes besieges the city of Bethulie, the young and beautiful widow Judith presents herself at his camp in an effort to save her city and people. Seduced by her outstanding beauty, Holofernes lets his guard down and drunkenly passes out. Judith takes this moment as an opportunity to behead the oppressor with his sword, thereby liberating her nation.” (Auvray) The overall tone of this painting is dramatic and violent;

depicting Judith and her maidservant, Abra, mercilessly slicing Holofernes' neck with a sword; his blood spurting, and staining the white sheets beneath him. Both their cold hard stares, the opposite of seductive, don't lure the viewer in with their desirability, but instead, the viewer is put in the position of a witness to the gory killing of Holofernes. This painting is a great portrayal of "female rage." Female rage is a concept that sheds light on the defiance and anger of women. It is often used in an artistic context, to spread awareness on patriarchy and the oppression of women. To Artemisia Gentileschi, who was herself sexually assaulted by her father's colleague, Agostino Tassi, this painting was a personal form of reclaiming power—a feminist message to women all around the globe. This is one of many paintings by her, in which a female is a strong subject, showing strength and resilience rather than weakness and vulnerability. This painting not only shatters the male gaze, but reinforces female rage with strength and the unflinching stares of Judith and Abra.



Judith Slaying Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi, 1620

The second painting that I will be discussing is, "Venus of Urbino" by Titian, which was painted during the High Renaissance period, specifically the High Renaissance period in Venice (1538). This painting is the epitome of the male gaze and the objectification of women. It depicts a nude woman, the goddess Venus, in a vulnerable and passive position, inviting and desirable. It is a portrayal of the ideal Renaissance woman, with fair skin and soft features, erotic and sensual.

"...the most telling symbol of The Venus of Urbino, is Venus herself and the dichotomy between the pure symbolism that surrounds her and the lustful characteristics she embodies. Calmly reclined on a day bed, we are given a full view of Venus' nude body. But instead of looking shamed or surprised, she looks directly at us, unblinking and unphased. The only gesture to hint at some form of shame, is her left hand gently covering her pudenda. But more than hiding her disgrace, this gesture draws our attention further, creating a stark contrast between the fully sexualized individual before us, and the purity symbolism around her. In many ways, this composition perfectly illustrates the double standard facing women during the Renaissance era. Although women were raised to ignore their sexuality and passions, men often sexualized them through art." (Richmond)

The overall tone of this painting is warm and intimate. It depicts a woman as a muse, as it was often done in the Renaissance period; lacking the complexities of being human, and simply submissive to the, often male, viewers. A caricature of herself.



Venus of Urbino by Titian, 1538

Judith Slaying Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi and Venus of Urbino by Titian lie at two ends of the same spectrum of how women are portrayed in art. While Judith Slaying Holofernes is a symbol of female rage, and power; Venus of Urbino is a demonstration of the ideal Renaissance woman, sensual and submissive—rather than as humans with individuality. Venus has been depicted as an object of beauty and desire, in contrast, Judith has been depicted as merciless and unafraid. One painting (Venus of Urbino) is one that conforms to the standards at which females were typically painted during the Renaissance period. In contrast, the other painting (Judith Slaying Holofernes) challenges the manner in which females are depicted in art. This comparison highlights the importance of the emergence of female artists, as Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith is a force, rather than just a body—a force to create a change in the way women are portrayed. Both paintings, starkly different, portray women in ways that reflect the perspective and intention of the artist.

CONCLUSION

The demonstration of feminism in art is one that is constantly evolving, as discussed in this paper—from the various Renaissance periods to the current era of modern art. The development of art—from the objectification of women in a male-dominated industry, to the redefinition of their portrayal through activism, and finally to women being given a platform to express their own perspectives—showcases the gradual empowerment of women in society. But what contributed to causing these changes? This paper discussed how the emergence of female artists played a significant role in this shift, and how the rise of Black female artists marked an important step toward overcoming intersectionality in art. A very pivotal moment in art came with the famous essay that sparked the feminist art movement, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” by Linda Nochlin. This essay questioned the structures of society that limited the recognition of women in art, and found that it is not a lack of talent on the part of female artists; it is, however, the presence of artistic and systematic barriers that play a role in hindering their ability to succeed in the world of art. Feminist art today is the result of centuries of evolution—from the questioning of gender norms and expectations to the inclusion of different races and sexualities. Art has grown to be a medium of true representation rather than just conformity. This has been demonstrated through the different subheadings that have been discussed in this paper—Beyond the Male Gaze: The Impact of Female Artists on Artistic Representation of Women, Intersectionality in the Artistic Landscape, and Female Rage vs. Male Gaze. As Judy Chicago once famously said, “Art is power. It can influence perception, opinion, and values.” And so, art will continue to grow and evolve. It will continue to be a reflection of the society we currently live in, and it will be a significant contributing factor to a world we hope to one day live in.

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