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Allegorical Women Figures in Renaissance Prints

In Linda Nochlin's fundamental text of feminist art theory entitled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists" (1971) she outlines some of the reasons why there are no women equivalents to the masters in art throughout the timeline of art history¹. In addition to societal roadblocks, such as women not being permitted to sit in on figure drawing classes, that limited the artistic spaces that women could access, one of the biggest reasons Nochlin gives as to why women have not historically been credited in art is because their place in the art world has been as muses and not masters. Traditionally, women have been sitters and subjects as opposed to creators and maestros. Despite women making a name for themselves in the art world in modernity, women as subjects serve many purposes in art that aid in our understanding of contemporary society's values and beliefs.

Particularly, when examining women as subjects in art in the 16th century, women figures were used often as an artistic tool to reveal a hidden message in pieces. Also known as allegorical figures, these women veiled themes that went beyond their physical bodies and into a more conceptual and metaphysical space. Allegorical figures can represent a myriad of themes, such as events, objects, or ideas, though sometimes they were modeled after women who actually existed. Author Carolynn Van Dyke describes allegory in her book entitled *The Fiction of Truth:*

¹ Linda Nochlin, "From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," ARTnews.com (ARTnews.com, October 20, 2020), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/>.

*Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory*² (1985) by stating, “Allegory is the disposable, fictional covering. What lies under it must be something that we assume to be real, that is fundamental, non-problematic and irreducible.” Much like the word allegory itself, deriving from the Greek word *agora*, these allegorical Renaissance women are often dressed in a classical Greek style, particularly the images that were emerging in the 16th century, since during the high Renaissance many artists and intellectuals were looking back to ancient Greek society as a way of creating a cultural revival³. Additionally, since the figures represented themes outside of their physicality, many of these women took the form of non-human entities, such as angels or goddesses, to further symbolize the concept they represented.

Take, for example, the anonymous German artist known as Master I.B.’s *The Genius of History*, a woodcut that was originally produced in the first half of the 16th century (Figure 1). In this circular miniature print, the female figure is seated in profile with her body turned $\frac{3}{4}$ to the viewer. In her left arm she holds a slate, which is angled towards the viewer, revealing the illegible writing she is inscribing onto it with the quill in her right hand. She sports a very classical hairstyle, with intricate curls flowing behind her. Atop her head is a diadem, fastened to keep all of her long curls in order. Even her silhouetted face is indicative of a Greek style, with a high nose bridge and a domed forehead, which were highly idealized features in ancient Greek art⁴. In addition to her visage, the woman’s body loosely follows a Greek canon, as she is draped in masses of folding fabrics over her wide set hips and her sleeves are shortened, revealing her

²Carolynn Van Dyke. *The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.

³Department of European Paintings. “The Rediscovery of Classical Antiquity.” Metmuseum.org, October 2002. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clan/hd_clan.htm.

⁴Alastair Macaulay, “The Body Beautiful: The Classical Ideal in Ancient Greek Art,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, May 17, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/18/arts/design/the-body-beautiful-the-classical-ideal-in-ancient-greek-art.html>.

broad shoulders and muscular arms. One of her most notable features is her outstretched, feathered wings that sit towards the left of the print, giving viewers further insight into her allegorical nature.

Her surroundings allude to not only tropes of Greek art and culture, but also the concept that she is representing: history. To the right of where she is seated is the torso of a male sculpture, exhibiting the idealized male body including the protruding abdomen muscles. Below the navel of the sculpture is a decorative waistband with a garland evoking the shapes of nature and fauna. Further to the right of the torso, the decorative aspects of the Greek canon continue, as more of the naturesque embellishments of the other pieces of sculpture emerge from the shadows of the background.

While history takes a more broad approach in contemporary academics, in the time of the European Renaissance, there was a more narrow view of the time periods that held value in history. Throughout Europe, there was a rise in appreciation for the classics, particularly the history of ancient Greece and Rome⁵. One such attribution to the newfound interest in history of these ancient European nations is the creation of humanism, an intellectual ideology that emphasizes the importance of studying antiquity as a way to analyze what it means to live the human experience⁶. *The Genius of History* is a fantastic example of what values of history that contemporaries of the Renaissance wanted to be carried on into their society, as the allegorical woman embodies many aspects of the ancient Greek canon.

⁵ Department of European Paintings. “The Rediscovery of Classical Antiquity.”

⁶ Mark Cartwright, “Renaissance Humanism,” World History Encyclopedia (World History Encyclopedia, April 17, 2022), https://www.worldhistory.org/Renaissance_Humanism/#:~:text=Renaissance%20Humanism%20was%20an%20intellectual,out%20lost'%20ancient%20manuscripts.

During the Renaissance, much of the subject matter of allegory pertained to Christian religion and morality. These artworks often included emotionally charged imagery or themes that were used to elicit an introspective response to audiences of the time⁷. In this way, these pieces were used to teach lessons about existential themes of life and challenge the notion of how people would live their lives from a moral perspective. These allegories would depict not only heavenly themes that pertained to a more devout life, but also themes of sin and death. Often, allegorical figures in these types of pieces would tell a cautionary tale, used as a way to show viewers how not to live, or rather, what ideals not to embody as a Christian of the 16th century.

The Italian Renaissance engraving entitled *Allegory of Vanity (Death Surprising a Woman)* (Figure 2) from the 16th century by an unknown artist serves such a purpose. Housed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., this print represents an allegory of vanity, a value that is frowned upon in the Christian faith, and thus was lowly regarded in Renaissance Italy. Naked from head to toe, the woman figure is situated in the center of the piece, spanning the entire sheet. Her body is front facing towards the viewer; however, she looks over her left shoulder into a mirror that rests on a pedestal behind her. Her head is wrapped in a folding cloth, and while her features are idealized, with protruding muscles and mannerist proportions, there are no features to make this allegorical figure identifiable or individualized.⁸

To the left of the woman, another figure emerges from the shadows of the background. An extremely gaunt figure with minimal skin and muscles peaks from around the corner of the wall. While his face is completely skeletal, locks of hair hang from the nape of his neck and

⁷ Charles Hope. "Religious Narrative in Renaissance Art." *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 134, no. 5364 (1986): 804–18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41374250>.

⁸ Kelly Richman-Abdou, "Mannerism: The Style That Put an Elaborate Twist on Renaissance Art," *My Modern Met*, October 19, 2018, <https://mymodernmet.com/what-is-mannerism/>.

veins bulge from his chest and arms. Seemingly, the figure is in motion, appearing to be entering the room as the woman admires herself. A cloak hangs from his shoulder, which sweeps and folds down to his legs and out of sight. In his spindly hands he holds a large hourglass, in which a pile of sand sits at the bottom. While his gaze is set on the woman, she seems to be unaware of the skeleton figure's presence. In a quite literal sense, the visual qualities of the piece are evoking the theme that death is near one who indulges in vanity.

By pairing the two figures together, the artist was making an intentional remark on the path of someone who decides to pursue or embody vanity. The woman figure does not know that imminent death is approaching her, as she is too focused on her own reflection to realize. To contemporary viewers, this image would have been a warning to any who chose to indulge in vanity: beware of the consequences of the person who is too focused on themselves to see what they have coming. Thus, allegory is used to caution those who stray from the teachings of the Bible; choose to indulge in sin and death can be quick to come.

Perhaps in contrast to religious motifs, allegory in Renaissance Europe was also used to conceptualize values of secular society. Artists would use female figures to represent some of the ethics and ideals that were significant to the public as a way of uplifting or empowering. By representing concepts and morals of a society with an allegorical woman, artists would also create a sense of community and stability, as seeing these Renaissance values manifest in a physical, human, state illustrated the amount of power that was behind many of these concepts, as they were highly regarded in society.

A well regarded and easily adaptable ideal to represent was justice, as it was a concept that many European nations valued during the time of the Renaissance⁹. The sketch, entitled

⁹ Guido Ruggiero, *Law and Punishment in Early Renaissance Venice*, 69 *J. Crim. L. & Criminology* 243 (1978).

Allegory of Justice (1533) (Figure 3) by German artist Georg Pencz is an example of this idea manifested into an allegorical woman that Pencz used to attempt to illustrate the strength behind the principle. In this sketch, the figure is once again completely naked and is centrally composed on the page. Her figure spans the entire page, giving a sense of gravity as she consumes the blank space of the page around her. She stands profile, with curls of hair flowing behind her. In classical fashion, her hair is fastened with a headband and her facial features fall in line with a classical Greek canon¹⁰. Her right arm is raised above her head and in her right hand she holds an intricately designed scale, a symbol of justice. Her left arm remains at her side, holding a raised sword that pierces up through the open space between her body and the scale. The woman appears to move forward, as one of her feet is stepping out and her hair flows behind her as though she is walking against a gust of wind. In the background, viewers can make out rolling clouds behind her, as though this woman figure is walking amongst the heavens.

Justice was an increasingly important ideal of the Renaissance and middle ages, as many of the historical defining texts of ancient Greek and Roman society embodied aspects of justice. For example, the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, or Justinian code, was a fundamental text of Ancient Roman society that served as an outline for the structure of law under Justinian's rule¹¹. During the Renaissance, as there was a high regard on the values of these ancient societies, the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* was reexamined and different values were pulled to make up many of the constructs of law in Europe. Subsequently, one of the values was justice and the idea that a citizen should pay their debts to society for any wrongdoings. *Allegory of Justice* not only conceptually

¹⁰ Department of European Paintings. "The Rediscovery of Classical Antiquity."

¹¹ Mark Cartwright, "Corpus Iuris Civilis," World History Encyclopedia (World History Encyclopedia, April 24, 2018), https://www.worldhistory.org/Corpus_Iuris_Civilis/.

embodies these morals, but also visually represents the importance of justice in Renaissance Europe with her gradious scale and regal stature.

After examining the use of allegory during the Renaissance for a myriad of purposes, it is important to reiterate that while conceptually they differ, they all center around an allegorical female figure. Furthermore, while these pieces are full of symbols and visual aids to allude to what concept each figure represents, the decision by each artist for the concepts to take the form of women is a significant point to be noted. By consciously doing this, in some ways they are choosing to feminize concepts such as history, vanity, and justice. However, these concepts are not innately unique to one sex or the other. So the question stands: why are these Renaissance artists choosing to visually represent these concepts with the female form?

In order to fully understand the reasoning behind this, it is important to examine the roles that women played in Renaissance society and how they were viewed by a larger public. In Joan Kelly-Gadol's essay, entitled *Did Women Have a Renaissance*, she examines the explicit position that women played during this time and how it landed them in a highly ranked society¹².

Primarily, without any outstanding societal ranking or achievement, women were legal property to their husbands or fathers and were excluded from many artistic and intellectual spaces.

Noblewomen were also viewed in this regard, but were sometimes allowed to accompany the men in their lives to spaces that were normally exclusive to men¹³. Though all things considered, the fact that women were allowed different rights depending on what man they were legally attached to had little to do with how they were viewed from the men in their circles. From the

¹² Joan Kelly-Godal. "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 1977. <https://doi.org/https://www.lettere.uniroma1.it/sites/default/files/622/Did%20Women%20Have%20a%20Renaissanc eX.doc>.

¹³ Anisia Iacob, "The Role of Women During the Italian Renaissance," *The Collector*, November 20, 2021, <https://www.thecollector.com/role-of-women-in-italian-renaissance/>.

male perspective, to have a woman by the side of a scholar, politician, ruler, or other important societal positions evoked stability and strength. Other than accompanying a man, women were expected to pick up a traditional role of a wife and mother, tending to the house and the husband's needs.

This gender divide left women at a great disadvantage societally, though the space that women were continuously visually represented in was art. While male figures often occupied historical and governmental art, women made up the majority of the remaining allegorical art. Though the irony stands: if women made up most of the allegorical art, which often pertained to intellectual and artistic concepts, what was the justification behind why they were not permitted to participate in these intellectual and artistic spaces?

The conclusion lies in the *mode de vie* of Renaissance Europe. In many European nations at this time, society was structured for the success of the white man, who held the greatest amount of power. As a result, those minorities that were viewed as inferior were easily exploited and used for purposes that were deemed acceptable for the majority, the white male population. Thus, while women were not permitted into intellectual circles, their physical forms were deemed significant enough to make use of in these visual attributions to scholarly ideas. Because the space that they occupied, the domestic space, was considered inferior to the spaces that the men occupied, it seems that they were easily targeted as being subservient, and perhaps even a blank canvas, for some of the academic concepts that were not readily available for them to explore. As a result, it could be stated that these female forms were used as a sort of *tabula rasa* to represent concepts that were not inherently masculine or feminine, but by pairing them with a figure that seemed to embody a more intellectually basic form of human existence, and was

second-class to the men producing these ideas and artworks, they projected a raw form of whatever concept they embodied.

In the coming eras, although women would be allotted more freedoms in the academic and artistic sectors of society, there continue to be societal roadblocks that paint them as lower than men in many facets of life. In following art movements, women would continue to take on the form of many allegorical figures in art, which may be able to give contemporary viewers insight into what roles women played in their communities.

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(Figure 1) Master I.B., *The Genius of History*, engraving, early 16th century, 57 x 57 mm



(Figure 2) *Allegory of Vanity (Death Surprising a Woman)*, engraving, 16th century, 35.9 x 25.2 cm



(Figure 3) Georg Pencz, *Allegory of Justice*, Pen and brown ink over black chalk, 1533, 19.2 x 14.9 cm