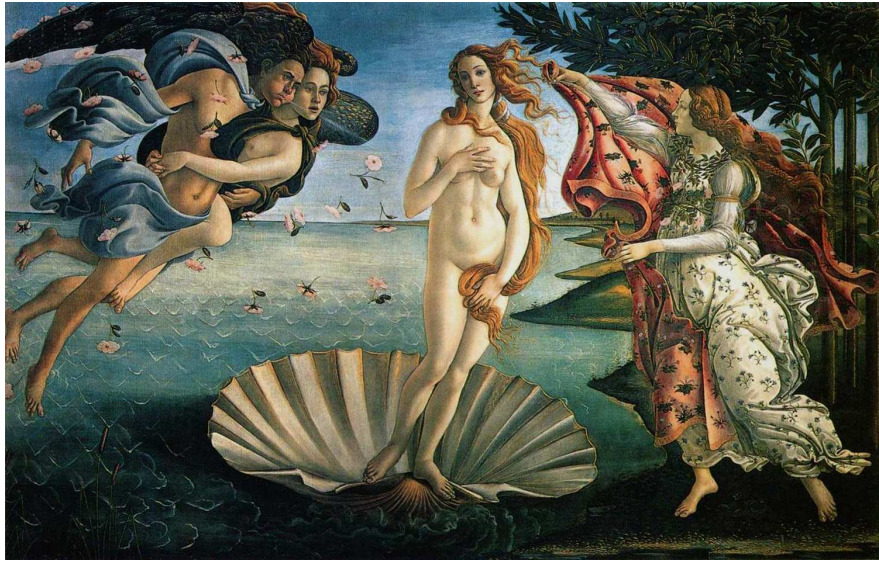


An Examination of the Pre 20th Century Female Nude Painted by Men

Through my own study of art, I have found myself consistently drawn towards works and artists based around life and natural forms but perhaps most fundamentally the human form. Although at first I mostly based my own work around portraiture and later hands, it was through this study that I became much more fascinated by life drawings and the meanings behind them; what they portray to the viewer and by whom they were painted. The female nude stood out far more than the male nude, due to the controversy which it created and the question of its acceptance. Looking back to the 15th century when the female nude first made its mark in history; I wanted to explore what influence it had on society, similarly what influence society had on it.

To many, the female nude is one of the most notorious subjects in the art world. Its profound symbolism and depth has conjured inspiration for artists thriving in the modernistic world today, to back in the late fourteen hundreds when such focuses of attention were seemingly controversial and only beginning to make their debut. However through my own exploration of the female nude I feel they somewhat depict the status or role stereotypical to that of a child-bearing race in society. When seeking past the voluptuous curves, it became apparent that in fact so many paintings dominated by the female nude pre 20th century told a story, one giving clues to how conservative the period was and also, to me what I find more interesting, clues to whether it was painted by a male or female artist. In my own opinion, I feel it cannot be denied that there is a difference between the way in which women express the subject to the way in which males express the subject, however this only became obvious to me once I began doing my own life drawings.



Possibly the most influential painting in the history of the female nude is Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus.' It was the first female nude created which in itself issues it was great importance, but moreover I was struck by its portrayal of a story. I feel this painting illustrates the beauty of the female and simultaneously, it defines plainly a suggestion of how society accepted the female nude being used as a muse. To such a scholar as Medici to whom the painting was commissioned; it told the story of the Goddess Venus's birth, as she 'emerges from the sea upon a shell in accordance with the myth'¹ whereby such divine refinement accompanied her. At first glance the painting's exquisiteness cloaks the many imperfections Botticelli harboured when endeavouring to tell a story. In my opinion, Botticelli's work signifies great importance of the female form but indicates a woman's role is one of physical strength rather than mental. Almost immediately I was struck by the unusual length of the neck coupled with such an acute fall of the shoulders, combined with the

¹ http://renaissance-art.suite101.com/article.cfm/meaning_in_the_birth_of_venus

abnormal depiction of her arm which is far from the realism Leonardo da Vinci captured; another prosperous artist of the century. However, ironically this only adds to the beauty. The graceful lines and softness create harmony for such a delicacies of the female form. Similarly the tãsh is almost unapparent resulting in the formation of fluid curves; which I in my own work tend to use as a subconscious reflection of fertility. On the other hand, this could purely be my own interpretation and in fact such ideas could perhaps not have entered Botticelli's thoughts. The mere fact he was a male artist has many implications on his interpretation of the nude; moreover the female nude. The same fluid curves which define fertility to me, could suggest attraction to the artist and were in fact erotic.

Furthermore, viewing the work now in the twenty first century compels me to have an opinion which would most probably be very different to the people viewing it when Botticelli created his portrayal of the female form. To the society viewing it at the time, the painting would be far more controversial and therefore interesting. Not only this, but also the heavy context of religion and mythology would have had more of a bearing on what the painting meant. The painting would have told more of a story, and be more embarrassing whereas today, people except the female nude far more easily, and are able to understand the idea of fertility, and a woman's meaning in the world.

Meanwhile, it isn't merely the female nude itself that defines the delicacies of the form. Moreover the backdrop which encases the focal point is representative of womanly assets. The 'Horae' Goddess of the seasons welcomes her with a flowery cloak. Stereotypically flowers often portray femininity as both their scent and appearance are dainty and what one could refer to as pretty. As an artist, exploring

other artists I have found more often than not, flowers integrated into a piece of work, automatically make a painting more friendly to the viewer. Nevertheless perhaps less evidently to the unlearned eye, the sea shell metaphorically represents the female vulva according to classical antiquity. In essence the painting is solely female orientated. This was contradictory to the time and was notably pagan but raises the status of a woman because of its boldness to be controversial. However discrepancy for this is the way in which 'Venus' is positioned. She was one of the only females captured in art during the period; rather it was the male nude which lay dominant. However her hands and long flowing hair are located purposefully to conceal her female elements. This is either for her dignity and poise or it is symbolising embarrassment. In my opinion, nakedness is often addressed with bashfulness whereas the nude is referred to with virtue, something beautiful and captivating. Therefore I question if this particular painting deserves the title of a first female 'nude' but instead a 'naked' female.

I began to question this further when comparing the history of the male nude, to the history of the female nude. The male nude prior to 'The Birth of Venus' had always been a dominant muse for artists and the male nude symbolised perfection. Particularly when focusing on the Ancient Greeks, I found the contrast between the male nude and the female nude obvious. A male nude was always depicted heroically as a reflection of the male dominated society. The male form, unlike the female form, was considered to be intellectually and physically inspiring, and so forth I struggled to find any female nudes. I feel this is an obvious reflection of how society during the Ancient Greek period, was to an extent, ignorant to a woman's strength. Not only in art, but in literature and as well, the overall hierarchy of their society, it is apparent men are seen as heroes.



This is an example of a pottery image from Ancient Greece, of two men boxing. Unlike 'Venus' they are not making any attempt to conceal their male assets and in fact their positioning suggests quite the opposite to that of Botticelli's female nude. When looking at this, I think of strength and power; two men struggling to be more dominant than the other. Their positioning looks almost unrealistic, as though the artist has deliberately depicted them in such a way to expose their bodies. This would suggest, that the male body symbolises power and confidence whilst the female nude is coy and enclosed, symbolising their inferiority and weakness in society.

Furthermore, although it would appear that The Ancient Romans depicted the male nude as slightly less perfect, suggesting their role in society was slightly less influential, art work from the period still demonstrates how the female nude is looked upon with more embarrassment than the male nude. When visiting the V&A museum I came across many art works depicting the male nude, most of which reflected how males were perceived as powerful. However I noticed this statue as it reminded me of 'Venus' in that the positioning is practically the same, other than the lowered hand in 'The Birth of Venus' and tousled hair, have the purpose of protecting the dignity,

whilst the Male nude's positioning has no other purpose than to create a seemingly natural pose; almost mid movement.



In the late nineteenth century, Renoir a famous Impressionist painter produced a piece of work titled 'The Bather (After the Bath).' The young woman depicted in this painting has many significant similarities to Botticelli's interpretation of 'Venus.' Most remarkably, again, is the posture of the female painted in 1888 in comparison to 1484's Goddess, with both hands and hair disguising the female elements. The idea is consumed around dignity as though it is inappropriate for a woman in a society to stand 'nude.' Furthermore, following the flowery essence portrayed in 'The Birth of Venus' which one could insinuate to be beautiful, it is obvious Renoir wanted to

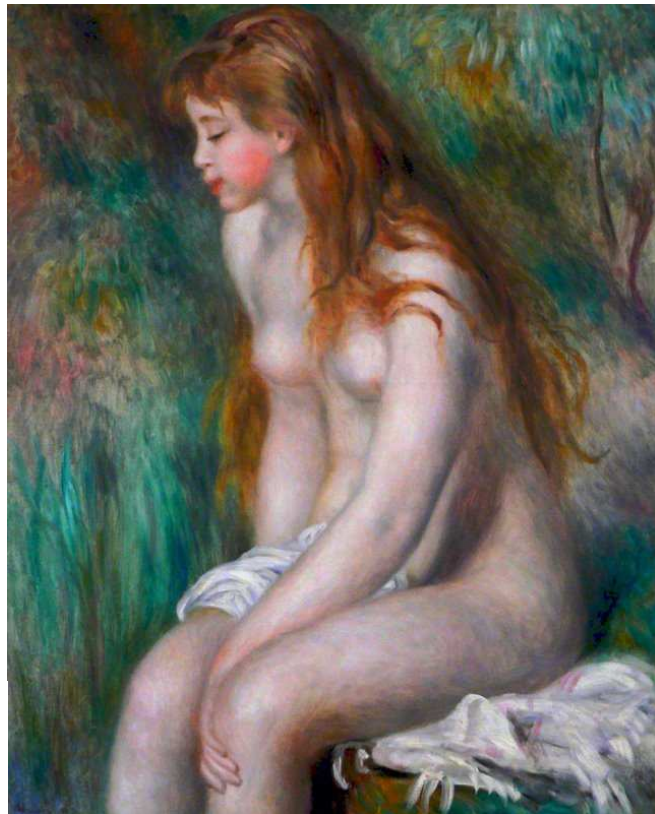
capture the same concept. This is not only apparent in 'The Bather' but in fact Renoir aspired to beget this in the entirety of his work as quoted, "*Why shouldn't art be pretty? There are enough unpleasant things in the world.*"²



Although I have never seen 'The Bathers (after the bath)' I have seen other pieces of his work. One work that struck me in particular and reminded me of the piece I am focusing upon, was 'Young Girl Bathing,' 1892 which I came across on a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Although the positioning is slightly less coy, the way in which Renoir chose to paint, reflects the delicacies of the female form. When moving through a crowded room I was automatically drawn towards this painting. From afar,

² http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=429

the painting looked blurred, as though in a sense, the artist was still trying to hide the subject matter, again hinting that the female nude during the time was still not looked at comfortably. However, when I got closer, I realised that the Tash in fact added to the beauty of the female form. When right up close to the painting, the beauty struck me, and I became less aware of the people around me, however the fact that there were hundreds of tourists surrounding the art work hindered my experience and I feel tainted my opinion. Viewing the art work today is a very different experience than viewing it when it was created. We are built up to have expectations of art, whereby we are indoctrinated with our society's opinions. Therefore, although to me there is nothing erotic about Renoir's work, I still question it, in the same way I could see all the other tourists were. Similarly, in viewing the painting back when Renoir first established the pieces, I feel I would have a different opinion of the painting. In fact, one would probably think the painting had very little to do with fertility and child-bearing, because of the atmosphere in Paris at the time.



The tiny delicate movements create a graceful and fluid figure and complement the female form. In my opinion, I don't think such brushstrokes would complement the male form as well, particularly not the strong, heroic males depicted back in times of antiquity. The small strokes would merely detract from the boldness and make the painting more shy. The brushstrokes are broken and the combinations of colours are vital in capturing compelling chiaroscuro as well as rendering movement.

To me, Impressionism reflects how society was adapting, and whilst symbolising a rebirth in Paris, it also symbolises how people were becoming more accustomed to the female nude. So much so, the way in which artists began to paint, was in a way to suit the womanly form. The colours also have the same effect. The figure is almost camouflaged with the background from a distance, as Renoir chose to take the flicks of colour from within the skin tone, into the background. When a little closer the colours appear harsher and more defined, but nonetheless, the earthy colours made me think of natural beauty. Conjointly both Botticelli and Renoir chose to use pastel tones in creating the skin; pale colours symbolising chastity or purity. I get the impression that the female form is part of nature, in the same way a landscape is. Neither the Woman in 'Young Girl Bathing' nor 'The Bathers (after the bath)' are amongst anything manmade or are doing anything to prove their strength. This is how I tie the link between the female nude in art, and fertility because the most natural thing of all for a woman is to conceive. In 'The Bathers (After the Bath)', in my female opinion she is standing amidst water, symbolic to purity and innocence or even metaphorical to fertility; when a mother's waters break. Therefore it could actually be said that both these paintings are delineating the role of woman in a society as plainly to bear children.

However as an artist myself; I feel my interpretation of the female nude has distinct differences to those of Renoir and Botticelli. Although both the paintings 'The Bather (After the Bath)' and 'The Birth of Venus' share an aesthetic beauty, there is also perhaps an underlying symbol of sexuality and eroticism which is why I have mentioned this before. When I compare my own work to these particular two, or in fact female nudes painted by men I can quickly notice a contrast in various areas of the art work. It even seems as though the female nude painted by men is exaggerated to represent a more erotic form of art; one to an extent, very contradictory to the concept of fertility. Or ironically, in fact a more subconscious form of fertility. Women are often displayed in a very flamboyant manner to perhaps draw the male eye. There is speculation for instance that model in 'The Birth of Venus' was Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci. Not only is it suggested that Botticelli himself had a love for this woman, which therefore hints his representation of her would subconsciously be beautiful and seductive, it is also suggested that Botticelli used a number of women to form the one we see today. I feel this could emphasize the fact the artist was trying to form a female form of perfection. In my own work; being a female myself, I feel perfection is simply concocting a form accurate to the one before me, be it aesthetically beautiful or not. Perhaps in the eye of a man perfection is formed through the representation of a stereotypical beautiful, voluptuous and fertile female.



These four studies are life drawings I did myself, of both the female and male nude. Unlike the artists Botticelli and Renoir, I have not attempted in any way to conceal the female elements, particularly with the study on the top right. She is standing in a neutral position which I feel gives her a confidence in the same way Roman art gave men. This reflects the true female form and also suggests that there is no embarrassment for a female artist depicting a female nude in our society today. Moreover, to compare with the male life drawing studies I have created below, neither male nor female looks inferior to the other. Both genders are portrayed as confident and natural and look relaxed. Although in the top left study and bottom right, the positioning does hide the figures to an extent, this was merely done to create realistic compositions, such as seated and lying down.



Looking back to works of Botticelli and Renoir, although the positioning of both females could be because of the period in which they were created, and the artists not wanting to provoke controversy, I believe it similarly could merely reflect the male interpretation of the female nude. In hiding the female form, it simultaneously brings attention towards it. In concealing what makes the nude female, I feel it makes the viewer wonder more what is being hidden. Nonetheless, the Renaissance period showed a rebirth of culture, with society becoming much more open, in fact to an extent more so than we are today to nudes, but the church and religion still had an overriding bearing on culture. The church still saw the female nude in the same respect medieval societies had done. 'Its medieval mentality postulated the holiness of spirit and recognized the body just as a part of decaying nature.'³ Therefore, censorship from within the church could be a dominant reason as to why the female nude was still so coyly depicted, reflecting that society was still too heavily orientated around religion to represent a female nude without covering the womanly elements.

Similarly to how the gender of the artist can have a bearing upon the art work, so too can the gender of the viewer. This brings forward the question as to whom the paintings were particularly aimed at. For we know that 'The Birth of Venus' was commissioned by a member of the Medici Family; Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco around 1482. In fact 'For nearly all of his life Botticelli painted for the rich and mighty of Florence.'⁴ Therefore, it is apparent most art work was either for the church, or for those with wealth. As discussed previously, paintings for the church were heavily

³ <http://www.aiwaz.net/from-breast-to-beard-story-of-renaissance/a63>

⁴ <http://www.weichtiere.at/Mollusks/geschichten/venus.html>

censored and the female nude was frowned upon. Meanwhile, the very few female nudes that remain today were created for influential members of society, who were not shy in expressing what they wanted. Important to note, these influential figures were predominantly male. This most obviously reflects a male dominated society, but also suggests that art was being tailored for the likes of males. As I have continually expressed, to a female such paintings as 'The Birth of Venus' represent fertility, but as these paintings were commissioned for men, it is more probable that the works were created to demonstrate sexuality and eroticism.

Therefore, when examining the female nude, there are a lot of mixed views on what it represents. One's opinion is heavily influenced by their own sex, and as well, the society in which they are viewing the work. Being a female in the twenty first century, to me the female nude merely represents nature and fertility. However, when examining the works of male artists prior to the 21st century, I get the impression they were more hesitant to portray the female nude naturalistically. People were made to believe the female nude was sinful, as it merely reflected sexuality and eroticism. Of course it would be unfair to suggest the works have nothing to do with this due to the fact, most painters were males, whom were painting for males. Which is why, perhaps many males today would probably still believe the paintings had much more to do with sexuality than fertility. One thing I can be sure of, is the female nude poses a lot of questions as people share such different opinions of what the subject signifies. This is why I believe the female nude is one of the most interesting subjects in the art world today. It represents a development in society, shows how people are becoming less embarrassed of the human body, and how woman are becoming more influential figures in society.

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Whitney Museum of American Art

PS1 Gallery

MoMA: The Museum of Modern Art

Metropolitan Museum of Art

Tate Britain

Tate Modern

National Gallery

National Portrait Gallery

Galleria del'Accademia

Webography

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