

Chapter One

The history of women as erotic subjects in art is endless; therefore in this chapter I am going to look at why in some cases, the female nude was so shocking. As this is a wide subject I am going to look at two main pieces; Titian 'Venus of Urbino' 1538 and Edouard Manet's 'Olympia' 1865.

Titian is stated to be the greatest and most versatile artist of the Venetian Renaissance. Titian excelled in portraiture, religious picture and mythological scenes.

Titian's nudes were from mythological scenes, mostly basing his females on goddess's favourably Venus, and these are embodiments of Neoplatonic ideas. Neoplatonism came from the philosopher Plato who believed that the visible world was a reflection of a mythological heavenly world. This was a popular belief in Titian's time, which is why art was based on mythological scenes set in modern settings.

Titian's most famous Venus was his most disputed; the Venus of Urbino, acquired in 1538 by Guidobaldo II della Rovere, duke of Camerino and Urbino as a possible matrimonial gift. There are three theories, which attempt to explain the paintings meaning; That the Venus is from the

mythology, a wedding picture or pornography. To understand the painting and its effect we must look at the society at that time. Women in the sixteenth century were seen as inferior to men. Men at were in control of the society at that time including women.

Women were often portrayed in art at that time as objects of beauty; this is why they were portrayed as goddesses.

If the female nude was accepted in their society then why did Titian Venus of Urbino cause such an outrage? This is because it broke away from the traditions at that time; the female nude was often portrayed in mythological scenes, which was accepted as it didn't directly express the male sexual interest in the female body.

The Venus image is clearly a product of Renaissance art; she stands for both sensuality and classicism that were typical of this era-but Titian's Venus is unusual as it depicts the female nude as beholding the beholder. Titian broke away from the "norm" of this era by creating an image that interacts with its audience. 50 years before hand Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus' was also said to be a wedding gift to Lorenzo de' Medici. The scene involved Venus, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, being born from the sea. She stands on a shell, covering her naked body with arms and hair elegantly, clearly showing a Greek myth. Titian on the other hand is relaxing and gazing at the viewer in a coy manner, in contrast to

Botticelli's shows a dream like innocent face. They also used different techniques such as Botticelli ignored perspective and Titian created distance between Venus and the servants in the background. Both were made for aristocratic families and both were perceptions of the goddess Venus, but gave very different impressions. There were both innovative of their times as Botticelli painted the naked Venus for the first time since the medieval ages, and Titian painted her as reacting with the audience in a domestic scene provocatively.

Titian's Venus appears in her bedroom. She is shown lying nude on her bed. The composition has been split into two sections; Venus is in the foreground and her servants are in the background. She is a feminine, voluptuous (typical of the fashion for large women at that time), and clearly an image of idealised beauty.

There are a number of points that show that the image of Venus is of a sexual nature; the naked young woman looks frankly at the beholder; her nipples are erect; her left hand is gently covering her genital area in an inviting manner. At that time in the seventeenth century there was a small but significant trade in pornography and pornographic images amongst the upper class, but it was very discrete which the picture challenged at that time.

The fact that Venus of Urbino is in a normal surrounding typical of that time, people began to question if it was a courtesan and not the

mythological Venus. But connotations in the painting represent a married Venus. For example the small dog at her feet is sign of fertility. The chests in the back ground with the servants are called cassoni, these were traditionally given to the bridegroom on his wedding, and they are a sign of matrimony. She holds a bunch of flowers, which is another sign of bridal values. The small dog at her feet is said to be a sign of fertility, these symbols are traditionally associated with Venus. People at that time were skilled at reading the meanings of symbols. If we look at what the symbols mean we understand what Titian was trying to convey to his audience at that time.

I believe the painting was meant for that purpose, to show a modern day marital Venus. An expert from Rona Goffen in *Witch's Women* states about the painting, "The image was seen as a marriage picture, the goddess of love characterised by her surrounding attributes as the protectress specifically of marital love. Although it still doesn't lessen the fact that this is a very erotic picture, maybe it was for the simple the displaying of a beautiful female object to be looked at by men. Titian was most famous for conveying this in many of his paintings.

Manet some centuries later completed one of his most famous and perhaps most intriguing painting in 1863. Entitled *Olympia* it outraged the public of nineteenth century France.

While the example for Olympia was Titian's Venus of Urbino, the context in Manet's paintings suggests a more contemporary theme than Titian.

Titian's Venus even though in contemporary surroundings, still represented Venus the goddess.

In the same year Manet completed and submitted 'Luncheon on the Grass' to the official salon where it was rejected by and instead shown at the 'salon des refuses'. The image is of two fully clothed gentlemen and one nude woman engaged in casual conversation in an outdoor setting, it wasn't greeted well and came under great criticism by the public and the critics. This began Manet's notoriety that he struggled to break away from. This painting showed that he was not an artist who followed the academic techniques, this was frowned upon in the arts in that time.

▲After the negative response of 'luncheon on the grass', Manet waited another two years before entering Olympia into the salon. Manet believed that to be a good artist his work must be shown in the salon, this is why the result of luncheon on the grass being rejected dismayed Manet. ▲Although Olympia was accepted, it still came under great criticism as people didn't understand Manet's conveying of modernity.

It currently hangs in the Louvre and is considered to be one of the greatest paintings of the 19th century. Even though at that time Napoleon III purchased a painting in the exhibition of Alexander Cabanel's 'Birth of

Venus', this was to directly show his disapproval of such an Avant-garde painting that didn't conform to the established techniques of academic painting.

In 1856 Manet went to Florence where he made a copy of Titian's Venus of Urbino. The recreation he made was to become the compositional prototype he used for Olympia. In Titian's Venus her gaze is flirtatious and coy; it doesn't threaten the viewer. Her hand gently curves over her genital area invitingly. The Venus of Urbino does not make the viewer feel uncomfortable even though the picture indicates a sexual nature, it is an entertaining image.

Manet's image portrays similar, yet at the same time strikingly different image of a nude young woman, than in Titian's painting. Olympia's pose seems to be awkward; she is propped up on pillows like the Venus but she is in a closed interior. By focusing on the foreground, Manet has set a mysterious scene and you are left to interpret. There are no signifiers of marital status in this image. Titian and Manet's images are similar as the compositional space of Olympia has been separated into two distinct areas of light and dark. Olympia's body, the bed, and the bouquet are in stark contrast with the background. It seems that the wall, curtain, servant, and cat are composed of slight variations of the same dark colours. There seem to be no half tones just direct colour, so every thing in the image seems to relate to the brightness of Olympia's body or the darkness of the

wall or the curtain in the background. Titian technique is more visually pleasing using a full range of half tones making the image more intimate and comfortable. Where everything in Titian is soft, everything in Olympia's world is hard and cold makes the viewer feel uneasy.

Olympia lies in a provocative fashion, but appears stiff and uncomfortable unlike Venus. Her figure is not voluptuous and appealing, but instead is thin and pale. Unlike the Venus, Olympia is not an idealised beauty. Her face is plain and ordinary lacking great feminine beauty and her hand forcefully covers her genitalia most uninviting manor. The animal in the picture is not a sleeping dog, but instead an arching frightened black cat. Not only is the cat a symbol of independence but also shows that the cat is uneasy with the viewer, this represents that Olympia has an intruding client. The cat is looking directly at the viewer; this is another connotation that sets you up as the client. Titian's sleeping dog on the other hand is clearly a sign that whoever Venus is making eye contact with, the dog is clearly familiar to them and does not see them as an intruder. This represents Venus's husband as the on-looker. The model in Manet's painting was of a prostitute that appeared in many of his paintings. Olympia represented this clearly she shows her forceful gaze and her sprawled fingers across her thighs demonstrate an independent women, a women who chooses her own destiny. She is shown to be upper class with the gold bracelet, the pearl earrings, and the well-dressed servant

seeing to her needs. These elements symbolise her wealth and vanity and clearly indicate her status. The flowers that are being presented to her by her servant that are ignored is clearly a gesture from a client. Olympia was a direct result of the society at that time a new phenomenon in modern French culture women who chose what they wanted to do. Manet instead of exploiting the female nude shows the reality of society at that time, so much so that the French public could not bare to look upon it. The thing that shocked the public most I think was Olympia's confrontational gaze, forcing the viewer to feel part of the scene. She is not teasing or flirting like Venus does, but seems in control of the situation. This composition sets up the viewer as a client instead of an on looker. The outraged caused was because Manet had openly set up a realistic scene that was all too familiar with the Paris me. It had shown the darker social truth that plagued France at that time, prostitution.

Prostitution was on the rise in Paris during this era, and so was the spread of syphilis.

In 1862, on year before Olympia was created, Manet's father passed away due to syphilis. Olympia seems to reflect Manet's awareness of what was happening in the society and that of which directly effected his personal life at the time. Many critic argued that Olympia herself displayed signs of being infected with syphilis "the women posing as Olympia appeared as if in a state of near decomposition". If you look at

Olympia flesh it looks yellowish and deathly that shows that she could have been infected with the disease that was plaguing Paris.

Manet attempted to mingle the distinctions between the classical past and the living present with a painting of a young woman nude in a contemporary environment. Manet imaginatively and successfully transformed Titian's Venus of Urbino into an image of a courtesan who reflected the setting of modern day France.

Edinburgh National Gallery

The National gallery of Scotland, is the one of the oldest galleries in Scotland it was built in 1850. It is situated in the heart of Edinburgh on the mound. It is home to Scotland's greatest collection of European paintings and sculpture from the Renaissance to Post-Impressionism.

When I went to the gallery I decided to pick three artworks that were relevant to my depiction of women. I will look at the artists themselves and their backgrounds. The three artists I have chosen are Sandro Botticelli 'The Virgin Adoring the Sleeping Christ Child', Titian's Venus Rising From The Sea' 1520, a sculpture by Antonio Canova 'The Three Graces' and Edgar Degas 'Woman drying herself'.

Sandro Botticelli

Sandro Botticelli was born in Florence Italy in 1445, his original name was ▲Alessandro Di Mariano Filipepi. His name is derived from his elder brother Giovanni, a pawn broker, nicknamed him "little barell" . He raised him so therefore gave him his second name Botticelli. He was a Florentine early renaissance painter whose Birth of Venus (1485) and Primavera (1477-78) are often said to be the classic paintings of renaissance. ▲Although he is said to be one of the most individual painters of the Italian renaissance, he remained little known for centuries after his death. Then his work was rediscovered late in the 19th century by a group of artists in England known as the Pre-Raphaelites. He lived all his life in Florence except for when he visited Rome to paint on the walls of the Sistine Chapel of the Vatican.

▲Antonio Canova

▲Antonio Canova (1757-1822) was considered the greatest sculptor of his time in Europe. His work became a model for all sculptors for many years. In 1802, Canova was invited to Paris by Napoleon, in order to carve marble portraits of the emperor and his mother and sister. Canova illustrates the Romantic Classicism that was so valued at the time: he creates daring images of seductive elegance and form. Canova is similar

to Titian and Botticelli as his approach is based on the mythological compositions and their Neoplatonic ideas. He is also used these ideas to portray a discrete eroticism, as did Titian. In the area of portraiture he is said to be one of the leading artists in idealization. He displayed a sensibility both to naturalism and to the early Renaissance, opening the way to two dominant trends at the beginning of the century: skilled realism and historical subject matter.

Titian

Titian is said to be the greatest and most versatile artist of the Venetian. Titian's art was based on three themes portraiture, religious pictures and mythological scenes which he equally excelled in all. Titian or Tiziano Vecellio was born in a small alpine village of Pieve di Cadore, now not far from the Austrian border. He arrived in Venice as a boy and became apprentice to a mosaicist. He soon entered the studio of Giovanni Bellini where he joined the famous painter Giorgione. In 1516 Titian was appointed as the official painter of the Venetian Republic. Titian's most distinguished commissions was for Charles V, Titian soon after was appointed the court painter.

Titian is most famous for his mythological compositions. He conformed to Neoplatonic ideas that were so popular at that time. Titian's style of painting involved a strong use of tone, creating noble forms and warm atmospheres, Titian created beautiful mythological scenes but set them

up as reality , Titian remained active until his death in Venice at about age 91. His last work was a Pieta' created for his own tomb.