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Inequality in Renaissance Art;  
A Study Into the Lack of Female Representation

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art.

By
Kaitlyn Anderson

Under the mentorship of Kimberly Riner

ABSTRACT
This paper explores how female biblical figures were under-represented during the Renaissance period. It explores possible reasonings, consequences, and then takes a physical exploration into the renaissance style through newly created artworks. It also explores in greater detail, two specific female biblical figures, their multifaceted stories, and their previous portrayals. Lastly homage is paid to the female artists throughout history who have been working to level the playing field in the art-world.

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Introduction

Throughout art history, there have been various eras and established timelines that are distinguished by the art created during this time. These eras and styles are defined by formal qualities, context, period, and location created. In this project, I focused on the Italian Renaissance period. This period started in Italy in the late 1400s. The Renaissance has long been regarded as one of the most important, and well-respected art eras. Notable artists from this period include Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Donatello. These figures all have something in common (other than having the ninja turtles named after them) in that they are men. If you do a simple ‘Google’ search for 'Famous Renaissance Artists', the first 26 results are men. Women, of course, did exist and create artwork during the time, so why are they not as easily recognized?

During the Renaissance, there was a return to the ideals and philosophies of Ancient Greco/Roman society. This return included a push for the idea that biologically women were child bearers, but men were the ones who gave life to their babies. Life was, quite literally, believed to be found within sperm, and women were incapable of creating life alone. This belief system bled over into art. Men were the creators who held the biological capacity to create art and original thought, and women were not. Women were truly at a disadvantage.
because their sex alone locked them out of artistic communities. All of these factors led to a significant lack of female representation - specifically in the art world.

During this period, art was in a struggle to free itself from guild control. This led to wanting paintings and sculptures using theoretical subject matter to prove the artist's capability of higher thinking. Religious and philosophical subjects, as well as historical subjects, became common subjects. This theoretical push in art led to a lack of female artists, as women during this time were considered to be biologically incapable of higher thinking in the way men were. Throughout this thesis, I studied and created Renaissance-style artworks featuring female biblical figures, in an attempt to shine a light on the inequality of the period.

Religion played a key part in the development of art and artists during the Renaissance. Patronage was the main funding source for artists. These wealthy groups or individuals would pay artists for commissions of their work, often asking for specific characters or portrayals. Patronage made the art world go round, and during the Renaissance, the church was a major patron. The pope would often commission well-known artists to do decorative frescoes in the cathedrals. These were meant to tell the story of Christianity and were a figurative notch in the pope's belt. They also commissioned sculptures to adorn
the outside of the church and graves. The church had the power to establish artists as prolific, simply by commissioning them for multiple projects during their lifetime. In turn, often artists would work in a style that appealed to the church in hopes of gaining patronage. This meant creating large, usually biblical works in the classical style. Frescos, paintings that were done directly on wet plaster for longevity, were a popular medium because of their availability and effect. These fresco artists would create intimate scenes directly out of the Bible, pushing the narrative that the church leader preached. Artists, while struggling for the title of liberal artists, were still workers, and were forced to appeal to the church's patronage to make a living.

I am pursuing this project because as a woman I want to be able to use my voice to explore this topic. I was raised Christian and have an insight into the community, and the characters within the Bible. I recognize that as an undergraduate I do not have the final authority on these issues, and I am learning through this experience. But I hope my uniquely modern female perspective has created a cohesive project, that I can look back on with pride for years to come.
The Madonna Whore Complex

One idea that has been explored in terms of the depiction of biblical women is the Madonna/Whore Complex. This is an idea proposed by Freud, which explained that men, and society in general perceives women in two categories. The first is the pure, divine woman, who they intend to marry. And the more promiscuous sexual woman, who they desire. The complex is based on the idea that these two women are separate, and do not intertwine in one person. Obviously we know that women are complex and multifaceted individuals, and cannot be defined by the limitations of these labels. But it appears common in Renaissance biblical art that the women depicted are just that, whore or madonna. The Madonna, being obviously the Virgin Mary (fig.2), who was seen by many as the perfect spiritual woman, because she bore a child while remaining pure. The whore element comes in with Eve (fig.1), the ultimate temptress who ate the apple and with Adam committed original sin. These two characters represent the dichotomy in scripture, and as such they were common images used in artwork. Other common biblical females who were depicted were saints, and less attractive depictions of women such as Mary Magdalene.
1. Adam and Eve, Titian, Italy 1550, Oil on Canvas
The issue with this idea and depiction of women in this way is that it plays into already existing social expectations for women, even to this day. Men grew up able to see themselves in biblical art as warriors, saints, brothers of Christ and more, whereas women looked at these two archetypes as their main options. Women were, and are, more than the sum of their sexuality, and can exist as sexual or pure beings without it being their defining characteristic. Women throughout art history have been working to expand this view of women, and even during the Renaissance female artists depicted a plethora of women. However, they were at an extreme social disadvantage that does not exist in this day and age, which is why I want to explore this idea through a modern lens. I
hope to choose and portray women who are multifaceted, and allow for both and more aspects of their personalities to shine through the art.

I do admit upfront that I am not the first, nor will I be the last artist to explore this issue. Artemisia Gentileschi famously created historical and biblical artworks depicting women during the late Renaissance period. Her most famous work is Judith beheading Holofernes. As only a woman could do, she takes on a unique perspective and compassion for this biblical character. However even as a well-respected artist, she faced adversaries and still does. Often her depiction of Holofernes has been viewed as simply a woman's anger. Gentileschi was sexually assaulted, and many viewers simply chalked up her work as an emotional reaction to that fact of her life, rather than the compelling story it also was. Women of course did create art and explore these ideas, however, I want to use the privilege of my modern platform to re-evaluate these ideas.

Throughout the contemporary art world, an unimaginable number of female artists have come forward expressing their concerns with the topic of a lack of representation. I want to acknowledge their work and their legacy as I continue the exploration of this subject. Beyond just the renaissance scope, in the last 100 years artists have been increasingly taking a stand against misogyny in the art world. The Guerilla Girls (fig.3) are a group of artists who famously challenge the lack of female representation in a museum context. Established in
In the late 1980’s this anonymous group of women creates public artworks which display the factual lack of representation in the art world.

3. Do Women Have to be Naked to Get Into the Met Museum? Guerrilla Girls, 1989, Public Installation

Beyond the guerrilla girls, artists such as Judy Chicago, Kirsten Stolle, Camila Soato, and countless others have explored the specific topic of sexism throughout the art historical canon. These artists have paved the way for conversations about inequality.
To begin, I want to acknowledge the various formal aspects that were common during this era. For paintings and two-dimensional art, there was an emphasis on draftsmanship technique, linear perspective, naturalistic depiction, manipulation of light and darkness, and contrast. Figures were often depicted in traditional Roman/Grecian robes, in bright colors (fig.4). Towards the latter end of this period, bright backgrounds were replaced with dark backgrounds, casting the subjects in harsh lighting which enveloped parts of their faces in shadows, this is called tenebrism (fig.5). The people depicted in art were very often naturalistic, with an emphasis on catching their features and expressions. Even more painterly artists still stuck to naturalistic or even over-perfected depictions of the human form. Composition was also massively important, with a push towards forced perspective, and triangular compositions. Religious and philosophical stories were used frequently as subject matter. This subject matter also carries into three-dimensional art, which is frequently found in the form of marble sculpture. These figurative sculptures are often seen in contrapposto stances with their weight displaced into one hip (fig.6). The eyes are often deep-set with heavy lids, and curly hair. They are again naturalistic, with intense detail. For my physical exploration of the topic, I created one of each.
4. The birth of Venus, Sandra Botticelli, 1484, Tempera on Canvas
5. Judith beheading Holofernes, Artemisia Gentileschi, 1612, Oil on Canvas
For my first piece, I wanted to attempt a sculpture. I am a sculptor by trade, but purely naturalistic depictions are not necessarily my style of work. However, I wanted to use the resources available to me as a modern woman, to explore a female figure from the bible, in a style that is historically well known. And for this figure I chose Judith.
Judith was a Jewish woman who ‘seduced’ a general and then beheaded him in his tents. She did this in an act of servitude for the Israeli nation. Her story is similar to that of David’s, using their strength to fight for their people. The main difference is that she supposedly solicited her target before killing him. This act of sexual intercourse to meet her goal made her less admirable in the eyes of many Christians.

To truly understand the story of Judith I headed to scripture. Her tale is a complex interweaving of religion and revenge. She truly was a woman for her people, willing to risk her life and body to save them. In the original Hebrew scripture, there is much talk about the moments leading up to the beheading of Holofernes. There is a description of the actions taken before, and Judith’s fear as she entertains and plots to kill Holofernes. In my research, I found that very little is told about the emotional state of Judith during the actual act of killing this man, who had just moments before violated her. Rather - the scripture talks about how God himself takes over her body and uses it as an extension of his will. Judith quite literally sacrificed her body for her people, and it is believed God used her as his sword. The act of murder was not her avenging her recent rape, but rather God putting down a man who was hurting his people.

I chose Judith for my sculpture because I believe she is a vastly underrepresented and misunderstood figure. Her story is extremely similar to that
of David, who fought against and killed Goliath to protect his people. But for centuries Judith was left out of Judeo/Christian discourse. To this day she is still not a part of many Hebrew studies. In comparison, arguably one of the most well-known sculptures in history is Michelangelo's David. This sculpture is extremely famous and rightly regarded as a masterpiece. Michelangelo was commissioned to do this piece in what was meant to be a series of biblical heroes. This piece soon became known as a counter-act to the Medici Family, who had control over a large guild in the area. The message was direct, just as David the underdog won through God so would the people. Formally this work follows classic Renaissance style, contrapposto stance, deep-set eyes, naked body. The Marble was left raw, unfinished beyond the sculpture. It is larger than life. In this version of David, Michelangelo depicts the man in a moment of contemplation before the kill. A silent moment of reflection and thought before committing a heinous and necessary act.

In direct response to the apparent lack of representation of Judith, and the historical love of David. I created a life-sized sculpture of Judith, in a moment of contemplation. I purposefully allowed this figure to be nude because female biblical figures have been censored for centuries where men were not. I wanted this sculpture to hold the same power and coverage as David. I chose the still, contemplative position because I think it holds a certain ambiguity that an action pose does not. There is no color in my piece, and you cannot tell if the knife is
bloodied. There is no indication to the viewer whether this is pre or post killing. I wanted the viewer to have to sit and contemplate with her. This is not the face of a woman filled with rage or content with action, but rather that still second that draws tension into her actions. I also attempted to stay feasibly close to the recognized renaissance characteristics. Deep-set eyes, contrapposto stance, and curly hair.

*Process and Results*

For the process of creating this piece I first researched the medium of my choice. Traditionally a sculpture in the renaissance would have been marble. However, this is an unreasonable material for a one-year thesis, as it takes an extremely long time to carve, and is very expensive. Rather I opted for the (still expensive) oil-based clay body. This is a very specific clay body that uses oil and wax as the base instead of water, so it can never dry out. This meant that I could sculpt for months without worrying about my clay drying out. And so I did. To save money, I researched and made my own clay body. This was about a three-month process that started by calculating the amount of clay I needed, which was estimated to be 200 pounds. The number of materials I needed, where to get the materials from, and how to make the clay. The material ended up all being locally sourced, and after a drive to Atlanta, I was able to start my process of actually making the clay.
The clay recipe I used was

10 lbs white microcrystalline wax
½ gallon pacified mineral oil
4 lbs petroleum Jelly
25 lbs ball clay

This recipe was one cultivated by Professor Jason McCoy and slightly altered to fit my needs. I individually cut, weighed, and melted the block of wax, and then mixed them with melted vaseline, oil, and powdered ball clay. I was only able to make 25-pound batches at a time, so I ended up making 12 batches (fig.7/8), resulting in approximately 300 pounds of clay. The cost of this clay to make was approximately $1200. However, this was a low cost compared to the alternate option of buying it, which would have cost upwards of $4000.
Once the clay itself was made, I was able to start on the conceptual building of the figure (fig.9). I used an anonymous friend as a model, as she fit the height and weight characteristics I was reaching for. Women during the Renaissance were famously depicted as very muscular, and almost masculine due to the lack of female models. I chose to use my modern ability to see women and create a more naturalistic depiction of a woman's body.
To support the weight of the clay I decided to create a wooden armature (fig.10), and cover it with foam (fig.11) before applying the final layer of clay. This allowed me to save money on clay, as well as have a solid base on which to construct my sculpture. The wood was reclaimed 1”x3” boards that I measured, cut, and attached it nails and wood glue. The joints were PVC pipes, as it was easy to bend under heat and pressure. The base of my sculpture was a 28lb garden weight- covered in foam- that I used as a counterbalance for the weight of the clay body.
The result was a full-sized, standing sculpture of my image of Judith, in a moment of contemplation (fig.11/12/13). This sculpture will later be cast, pending funding from my next phase in life. For now, it stands alone as a sculpture, hopefully, to be shown in future shows.
My next medium to explore was painting. During the Renaissance lots of paintings were done fresco style, which is painting directly into the plaster of a wall. I decided to take an alternate route and use oil paint, as it is more familiar to me. For the figure head in this exploration, I chose Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene, not the Virgin Mary, was a close follower of Jesus. She was often described as being one of his most devoted followers. She was there at his crucifixion and was the first to see him after he rose from the dead. She was supposedly at the last supper although was excluded from the actual dinner. She was personally cleaned of her demons by Jesus and was regarded in the group of disciples, but was not one of the 12. For centuries Mary Magdalene has been mis-represented and put down in discourse. She is often represented as a dirty woman, a reformed prostitute who kneeled at the feet of Jesus. She also has historically been confused with other Mary’s from scripture, and it is even speculated that her stories are made up of the stories of multiple women at the time, condensed into one figure. She has, historically, been made lesser than the sum of her actions. Directly from scripture we can see Mary Magdalene as a reformed woman, who dedicated her life to Christ. She regularly serves him, and is regarded as the first proclaimer of the Easter message, as she was the one who sat by his tomb before resurrection.
This split of Mary Magdalene, and the lack of representation for her can be seen in art. Mary Magdalene has often been depicted in less than flattering ways. She is depicted as lying on the floor often, looking down rather than up, half naked in a derogatory sense, and even as physically melting and ghoulish (Donatello, fig.14).

![Penitent Mary Magdalene, Donatello, c. 1455, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy.](image)

Artemisia Gentileeshi created a stunning painting of Mary Magdalene in a proper holy pose, positioned upright, with all of her clothes, during the Renaissance (fig.15). However as we previously discussed, she has not been
given the same credit and acclaim that her male counterparts were, and thus her artwork is less known.

15. Mary Magdalene, Artemisia Gentileschi, 1616–1618, Pitti Palace, Florence
I chose Mary Magdala (as she is sometimes called in contemporary discussion) as the figure for my painting because I believe she embodies the issue of the Madonna/Whore complex, and is a quite interesting figure without either facet defining her. Her story has been confused and mis-represented for centuries, and I wanted to explore the depiction of her as a person.

For this painting I chose to do a direct style oil painting on stretched gessoed canvas. I chose the direct painting method because it is quicker than indirect painting, which would have taken me well over the scope of my thesis time. Direct painting simply means I laid the color I wanted directly onto the canvas, rather than making layer upon layer of transparent paint glaze to build up the figure. For the imagery, I wanted to depict her in an up-right, holy position, but still with her shirt flowing slightly loosely off her shoulders. I wanted her to have power over the viewer by facing upright, with her eyes glancing towards the sky, rather than shamefully to the ground. I also wanted to make the painting physically large in order to demand more respect from the viewers. The process of painting was much more straightforward than sculpting, as I purchased the canvas and paints, took reference images myself, and began working. The process was long, but resulted in a painting of Mary Magdala in prayer position. I admittedly used myself as a rough reference, not as any sort of commentary, but for ease of reference. She has historically been depicted as a fair skinned woman with long brown hair, a description which I match perfectly (fig.16/17/18).
A final note I would like to make is that my recreation of these ideas and exploration is not enough. Women from the past should be given the opportunity to have their work admired and respected as much as their male counterparts. This is an issue with the canon of art history. There is a certain set of art that is expected for art historians to know, and even in modern textbooks they are predominantly male driven. My project is not an end cap to this issue, it does not put a dent in the centuries worth of systemic discrimination against women. In order for a true change to come about, the entire education and museum system needs to be re-worked in an effort to equal the playing field and create a truly inclusive space for artists from all eras.


11. Bareket, Orly, Rotem Kahalon, Nurit Shnabel, and Peter

