

Women's image and role in art: from Medieval virtuous mystics to today's Advertising perverse figures

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Abstract: *For various historically documented reasons, women have always been considered a paradigm of either virtue or perversion. In this article, we focus firstly on the image of women as reflected in medieval illuminated manuscripts, where portrayals ranged from mainly mystics in convents, saints, mothers, damsels in distress, labourers in the fields and even women of ill character. Apart from that, we mention the role of women as writers and illustrators of Manuscripts. Secondly, we have a brief look at modern western art, based on the heritage of medieval art, that carries on even further the stereotyped image of women, systematically objectifying them. Thirdly and finally, we examine how this has influenced today's advertising depictions of women, outlined with distinctive characteristics. The visual discourse emphasizes certain physical and moral traits based again on clichés, stressing mostly decadent passive attitudes and poses or submissive roles. The present research is quantitative and qualitative, based on case studies and referred in articles on Medieval Illuminated Art and Today's Advertising and Mass Media.*

Keywords: medieval, women, western, art, advertising, stereotypes

1. Women's image and role in Medieval Art. Positive and negative depictions and authorship of Illuminated Manuscripts

„The roles of women in medieval times is a subject that has been little explored despite the considerable visual and literary evidence that exists”, explains Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum at the opening of the *Illuminating Women in the Medieval World* exhibition from September 2017. „There are abundant representations of women in medieval

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art with which we are all familiar, including female saints, royals, and everyday labourers”¹ but also some less known, such as that of art patron.

There are biblical heroines, female saints (fig.1), and pious nuns (fig.2) who were held in high honour as models of appropriate behaviour (fig.3).



Fig. 1. Unknown *Vita beatae Hedwigis*, 1353, Tempera colors, colored washes, and ink on parchment bound between wood boards covered with red-stained pigskin Leaf: 34.1 × 24.8 cm (13 7/16 × 9 3/4 in.), Ms. Ludwig XI 7 (83.MN.126) The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. Ludwig XI 7

Some passionate women were used as warnings against sinful conduct.

According to Christine Sciacca, curator of the exhibition mentioned above and author of the book *Illuminating Women in the Medieval World*², medieval notions of ideal womanhood were everywhere in the illuminated manuscripts. However, in addition to establishing positive role models,

¹ <https://www.medievalists.net/2017/06/illuminating-women-medieval-world-getty/> (accessed on 02/09/2021).

² Christine Sciacca, *Illuminating Women in the Medieval World*, J.Paul Getty Museum, Getty Publications, Los Angeles, 2017.

medieval artists and thinkers used the Judeo-Christian creation account to reinforce some negative conceptions about women.

On the one hand, we have Virgin Mary as the ultimate female archetype, whose obedience to God and love for her son conceived without sin, till his death and beyond, set a paradigm for the faithful. Female martyrs dying for their faith offered historical models of purity and a resourceful inspiration for art early on.



Fig. 2. Unknown *Saint Hedwig and the New Convent; Nuns from Bamberg Settling at the New Convent*, 1353, Tempera colors, colored washes, and ink on parchment. Leaf: 34.1 × 24.8 cm (13 7/16 × 9 3/4 in.), Ms. Ludwig XI 7 (83.MN.126), fol. 56 The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. Ludwig XI 7, fol. 56 (left)

Fig. 3. Master of Sir John Fastolf (French, active before about 1420 - about 1450) *Saint Anne Teaching the Virgin to Read*, about 1430–1440, Tempera colors, gold leaf, and ink on parchment. Leaf: 12.1 × 9.2 cm (4 3/4 × 3 5/8 in.), Ms. 5 (84.ML.723), fol. 45v The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. 5, fol. 45v (right)

On the other hand, we have Adam and Eve. In the Middle Ages, authors and theologians blamed Eve for the temptation – she was the one who incited Adam to take the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. As a result, women were considered feeble, temptresses with poor judgement and in need of counselling. In some cases, both virtuous and evil women were painted in the same picture to highlight the difference between good and evil.

Furthermore, although there were more saintly models than wantons, the iconography was meant to induce the reader to reconsider their conduct (fig.4).

An essential type of illuminated manuscript was The Book of Hours, considered "the medieval bestseller of those times" (fig. 5). They contained prayers to be said by devout laypeople at different times of the day. Reading the holy texts, laypeople imagined themselves witnessing sacred events and conversing with holy figures.



Fig. 4. Master of the Chronique scandaleuse (French, active about 1493 - 1510) *Denise Poncher before a Vision of Death*, about 1500, Tempera colors, ink and gold Leaf: 13.3 × 8.7 cm (5 1/4 × 3 7/16 in.), Ms. 109 (2011.40), fol. 156 The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. 109, fol. 156

These books were considered suitable possessions of wealthy Christian women and a testimony of their faith. Many women chose to be portrayed in their heavily illuminated books, where they usually appear kneeling in prayer before the Virgin. For example, in her Book of Hours (Ghent, *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, the late 1490s, book found in Vienna, at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek – Ms. 1857, Fol. 14v), Mary of Burgundy is shown reading in an oratory. Beyond the still life on the sill, the window opens into a church where she is again shown, kneeling before the Virgin and the Child (fig. 6).

The interesting fact about women at that time is that they were not only portrayed in the books as owners of books, but there are also accounts of women who had been writing, copying, and illustrating books, at least as far back as Hroswith of Gandersheim, author of chronicles and plays in the tenth century. The arrival of the Observantist Reform Movement in northern Europe during the fifteenth century brought with it a veritable "explosion" in women's scribal activity.³



Fig. 5. Workshop of Master of the First Prayer Book of Maximilian (Flemish, active about 1475 - 1515) *Mary Magdalene with a Book and an Ointment Jar*, about 1510–1520, Tempera colors, gold, and ink on parchment Leaf: 23.2 × 16.7 cm (9 1/8 × 6 9/16 in.), Ms. Ludwig IX 18 (83.ML.114), fol. 264v The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. Ludwig IX 18, fol. 264v (left)

Fig. 6. Ghent, *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, late 1940s, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek – Ms. 1857, Fol. 14v (right)

A Chronicle written by sisters at the Benedictine Cloister of Ebstorf in Lower Saxony recounts that in the first years after the house was reformed by Observant activists from Hadmersleben (1464-1470), all of the old liturgical books were cut up and replaced with new ones following the more uncomplicated Bursfeld common liturgy. It relates how the sisters themselves

³Laura Light: *Women and the Book in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Les Enluminures LTD., New York, Chicago, and Paris, 2015, pag. 10 (Introduction by Anne Winston-Allen).

laboured mightily to copy twenty-seven significant manuscripts (Breviaries, Collectars, Graduals, Gospel Books, Psalters, Antiphoners, Lectionaries and Hymnals) and proudly names six sisters who accomplished this monumental work.⁴ In the secular world, one hears of women trained as illustrators who worked in family workshops, such as the daughters of the Nuremberg painter Georg Glockendon the Elder (d. 1520) or Jeanne de Montbaston (c. 1353), who illustrated copies of the lives of saints as well as secular manuscripts in Paris together with her husband, Richard de Montbaston⁵. There is also the illuminator Anastasia in Paris, whom Christine de Pizan praises for her skills at painting the backgrounds of miniatures. Daughters of prosperous painters such as Konrad Witz and Paolo Uccello were sometimes accepted into convents, as Katharina Witz, who became a nun at Basel's Magdalen Cloister in 1454⁶. Antonia Uccello (1456-1491) – whom Giorgio Vasari called "a daughter who knew how to draw" – entered the Carmelite cloister at Florence, where records list her as "pittorressa" although no work by her has so far been identified. The last great Flemish illuminator, Simon Bening (d. 1561), active in Bruges, trained his daughters as illuminators; one became court painter and "limner" to Edward VI of England and another a dealer in paintings, parchment, miniatures, and silk.

Women's books have much to reveal about late-medieval society and women's role and influence in it. Convent books – apart from their obvious aesthetic and devotional significance – also had economic, political, and social functions that extended beyond the walls of the religious house. Women's convents served the secular community as schools for educating young women of the aristocratic classes, as safe guardians of records (wills, deeds, contracts), as financial institutions for lending and investment, as employers of craftsmen and artisans, as distributors of food and alms to the poor, and as places of retirement toward the end of life. Christine de Pizan, for instance, retired to the royal abbey of Poissy after life at court as an author-scribe of deluxe manuscripts. Moreover, the pious nuns of a reformed convent guaranteed that anniversary prayers would continually be said for souls in passage through purgatory and that prayers of intercession would be offered for the welfare of the town's inhabitants in the here and now.

Women made thousands of prayer books and illuminated an excellent part of them. In books they purchased or made themselves, women still

⁴ Conrad Borchling ed. "Litterarisches und geistiges Leben in Kloster Ebstorf am Ausgange des Mittelalters," *Zeitschrift des historischen Vereins für Niedersachsen* 4 (1905), pp. 361- 420, cited by Laura Light, see note 3.

⁵ Richard and Mary Rouse: *Manuscripts and their makers; Commercial Book Producers in Medieval Paris 1200-1500*, 2 vols. New York, 1999, pag 235-260 vol.1.

⁶ Emila Erdin: *Das Kloster der Reuerinnen Sancta Maria Magdalena an den Steinen zu Basel: Von den Anfängen bis zur Reformation (ca. 1230-1529)*, Fribourg, 1956, p.80, cited by Laura Light, see note 3.

tended to prefer prayer books, vernacular lives of saints, sermon collections, tracts, and devotional treatises. And while women of the high nobility such as Margaret of Savoy also owned courtly romances and popular non-fiction, most hand-written books before printing were still religious works. Here is a list of some women authors, artists, scribes, patrons, and book-owners accounted for and cited in Laura Light's book⁷:

1. SULPICIA (late first century B.C.) was the only female poet from ancient Rome whose works survive today. Her poems are found in the *Corpus Tibullianum*, a collection of poems by Tibullus and others, preserving an aristocratic female voice from the Augustan milieu of Horace and Vergil.

2. FALTONIA BETITIA PROBA (c. 306/315-c. 353/366) was the author of a centon in Virgilian hexameters, the *Cento vergilianus de laudibus Christi*, an account of the significant events from Creation to Pentecost. This work was read throughout the Middle Ages, and her biography was included in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* and Christine de Pizan's *La Cité des Dames*.

3. AELIA EUDOCIA AUGUSTA (c. 401-460), the wife of the Eastern Roman emperor Theodosius II, was a poet and author of a Homeric cento that borrowed lines from Homer's epics to retell parts of the biblical narrative and a work on the martyrdom of St. Cyprian, also in verse.

4. HROTSVITHA OF GANDERSHEIM (c. 935-1002) was a poet and dramatist who lived at Gandersheim Abbey in Lower Saxony; notable for her knowledge of classical authors; she was the author of eight verse legends, six plays, and two epics.

5. MARGARET OF SCOTLAND (c. 1046-1093), daughter of Edward the Aetheling and Agatha of Hungary and wife of Malcom of Scotland, was canonized in 1250. Her *vita* depicts her as an educated woman who read the Bible to her husband; the small Gospel Book, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS lat.liturg.f.5, which miraculously survived unharmed after carelessly dropped into a river, is described as her favorite book.

6. MATILDA OF SCOTLAND (c. 1080-1118), daughter of Margaret of Scotland and wife of Henry I of England, commissioned a life of St. Brendan in Latin and then a second version in the vernacular for her ladies.

7. ANNA COMNENA (1083-1153), a Byzantine historian of the first crusade, is considered the first female historian; her chronicle is a significant source of information about the reign of her father Alexis I.

8. HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098-1179) was a Benedictine nun and Abbess, a mystic, theologian, and author of numerous works: three volumes of visionary theology including the *Scivias*, musical compositions

⁷ Laura Light: *Women and the Book in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Les Enluminures LTD., New York, Chicago, and Paris, 2015, pag. 18-23 (Introduction by Anne Winston-Allen).

for the liturgy, a musical morality play, nearly four hundred letters, sermons, medical works, and many more.

9. HELOISE (c. 1101-1164) was trained in the classics, Latin rhetoric and philosophy, and knew not only Latin but some Greek and Hebrew; her tragic love affair with the philosopher Abelard is famous; after their dramatic parting, she entered the convent at Argenteuil, and subsequently became Abbess at the Paraclete; her correspondence with Abelard survives.

10. HERRAD OF LANDSBERG (c. 1130-after 1196), Abbess of Hohenburg, was the author of the *Hortus deliciarum* (Garden of Delights), which included captions in Latin and German to teach her novices Latin.

11. GUDA (12th century, the second half?) was a scribe and artist; an initial in a Homiliary from c. 1175 (now Frankfurt, Stadtbibliothek, MS Barth, 42), shows Guda, dressed as a nun, and holding in her hand a banderole inscribed, "Guda peccatrix mulier scripsit et pinxit hoc librum" ("Guda a sinner wrote and painted this book").

12. MARIE OF CHAMPAGNE (1145-1198), daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, was a patron of secular and religious works; she commissioned Chrétien de Troye's *Chevalier de la charrette* and in her widowhood Evrat's translation of Genesis, and probably a translation and gloss of Psalm 44, "Eructavit cor meum."

13. MARIE DE FRANCE (fl. c. 1160-1215) is known today for her works in Anglo-Norman French, including twelve *Lais* (short poems on courtly themes), a rhymed collection of Aesop's Fables, and the *Purgatory of St. Patrick*. She may have been an aristocratic woman, perhaps a nun, living in England but "from France," as she tells us in the *Fables*.

14. SAINT CLARE OF ASSISI (1194-1253) was one of the first followers of St. Francis of Assisi, and author of the rule for Franciscan Nuns, commonly called today in her honor the Poor Clares.

15. BEATRICE OF NAZARETH (1200-1268) was a Cistercian Nun from Belgium, and author of the *Seven Manners of Love* and a diary in Dutch, apparently destroyed when her Latin Life was written.

16. MARGARET OF PROVENCE (1221-1295) was Queen of France and wife of Louis IX; she commissioned a translation of the *Speculum historiale* by Jean Vignay.

17. MECHTILD OF MAGDEBURG (c. 1207-c. 1282?), a beguine who entered the Cistercian monastery of St. Mary at Helfta late in life, was the author of *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (The Flowing Light of Divinity) describing her mystical visions of God.

18. MECHTILD OF HACKEBORN (1240/1-1298) was a Cistercian Nun at the convent of St. Mary at Helfta in Saxony and the author of the *Liber specialis gratiae* (Book of Special Grace).

19. GERTRUDE THE GREAT, OR GERTRUDE OF HELFTA (1256-1301/1302), also a Cistercian Nun at Helfta and Mechtild's protégé, was the author (with her sisters) of the *Herald of God's Loving Kindness*.

20. MARGUERITE PORETE (c. 1250-1310) was a beguine from Valenciennes and author of the *Mirror of Simple Souls*; she was burned as a heretic in 1310.

21. GISELA OF KERSSENBROCK (d. 1300) was a Cistercian nun in the northern German city of Rulle who served as choir mistress, and who probably worked most of her life writing and illustrating manuscripts, including the Gradual known as the Codex Gisle, Osnabrück, Gymnasium Carolinum und Bischöfliches Generalvikariat, MS p.004.

22. BRIDGET (or BIRGITTA) OF SWEDEN (1303-1373) was the founder of the order of Bridgettine nuns and monks; her mystical visions were recorded in the *Revelationes coelestes* (Celestial Revelations).

23. BLANCHE OF BURGUNDY (d. 1348) was Countess of Savoy and the granddaughter of Louis IX of France; she commissioned a Book of Hours now known by her name (Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS 390) that was made Paris at the atelier of Jean Pucelle; although only a fragment of her book survives, she is depicted a remarkable twenty-five times.

24. CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347-1380), a Dominican tertiary, is an example of a religious woman, known for her asceticism, who led an active life as a peacemaker and prophet; her writings include her mystical treatise, the *Dialogue of Divine Providence*, prayers, and more than 300 letters, many of them to the prominent political leaders of her day, and more than one third to other women.

25. JULIAN OF NORWICH (1342-c. 1416) was an English anchor regarded as one of the most important medieval mystics; she recorded her visions in the *Revelations of Divine Love*.

26. ANNE OF BOHEMIA (1366-1394), wife of King Richard II of England, commissioned a translation of the Gospels into English.

27. CHRISTINE DE PIZAN (1364-1430), known as the first professional female author, supported herself and her family by writing after her husband's death in 1390, composing forty-one works, all in French, including *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* ("The Book of the City of Ladies") and *le Trésor de la Cité des Dames* ("The Treasure of the City of Ladies").

28. ANASTASIA (fl. c. 1400) was a French artist and illuminator who specialized in decorative borders and the backgrounds to miniatures; Christine de Pizan praised her in *The Book of the City of Ladies* as the finest illuminator of her day.

2. Women image and role in Modern Western Art. Continuity of positive and negative aspects, objectification and stereotypes

The female image in patriarchal society originates from the Greek-Latin culture, but it is influenced by the Judeo-Christian and Catholic traditions, as we mentioned at the beginning of our previous chapter. We will continue now to look at the image of women as it develops through the centuries, till our present times, based on portrayals described at the beginning of this article.

The interpretation of the biblical account of contempt and the characterization of Eve as an agent of sin have deeply marked Western morality and theological thought. In the words of Gerda Lerner, the most influential gender metaphors present in the Bible have been those of woman, created from the rib of man, and Eve, the temptress who causes humanity's loss of grace. For two millennia, they have been cited as proof of divine support for the subordination of women.⁸ The discriminatory discourse created around the first woman is enlivened in the medieval religious tradition with the introduction of another element, motherhood, which becomes diacritical of the concept of femininity. Through the Ave/ Eve anagrammatic dichotomy, the Church's thinkers establish a forceful dualism between Eve, the woman of flesh, the sinner and mother of the living, and Mary, the total pulchra, chosen to gestate God himself. Anagrammatic paronomasia had already appeared in the second century. According to Gambero, the first to include parallelism in his writings were San Justino the Martyr and San Ireneo de Lyon⁹. However, from the twelfth century and as a result of a crisis in feudal normative systems that endangered the sacredness of the marriage institute, attention emerged towards female sexuality as a guarantor of family unity. With this, a reformulation of the vision that women traditionally had as a promoter of chaos in the world from the mythical story of the book of Genesis took place. From there, and following the exegetical model of the Church, the chaos of sin introduced into the world by a woman must be neutralized by another woman who introduces order, redemption in it. [...] In the incipient literature of the Romance languages, the theme of the opposition Ave/Eve was created, or what is the same between Mary, the new Ave, giver of life, and Eve, mother of the human race, introducer of both physical and spiritual death in the form of sin.¹⁰

In addition to the criteria that, since the Middle Ages, initially linked women to sin, lust and ignorance, in the middle of the 19th century, the myth

⁸ Gerda Lerner: *La creación del patriarcado*, Ed. Crítica, Barcelona, 1990, pag. 270.

⁹ Gambero, Luigi: *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1999, pag 46 and 54.

¹⁰ José María Izquierdo: *Ave/Eva. Comentarios acerca de una tipología artística bajo-medieval*, *Romansk Forum* 17, 2003, pag 59-70.

of the angel of the home was forged, which further entrenched women in the domesticity and destines her solely for nurturing, divinizing the act of generating and setting the motherhood of Mary as the model of mother to follow. To mark the final turn towards the mythification of the maternal instinct are, without a doubt, the medical discourses that looked only at public prosperity. As Moreno and Mira explain well, allusions to nature and an essentialist conception of sex served to explain the social function of women. The female body had been configured for motherhood, thus becoming an inexcusable destiny for women¹¹.

Counter-discourse of that woman devoted to family life is the bad mother, a woman afflicted by a chronic bovarism, fluctuating between the illusions of an ideal world and the reality of conjugal and maternal life, unsatisfied, careless and selfish who will make way for the figure of the fatal woman of the thirties.

However, we have to see that most of these stereotypes have been created by the world of men. It is not how women have portrayed themselves but how they appeared through men's eyes. We are looking at a limiting imaging of women. Men have always been in control of the archetypal constructions of womanhood that have influenced ideas of how women should appear and how they should behave, or how they see themselves, from the mild and patient Virgin Mother to the always-available sensuous Venus pin-up, or the vulnerable damsel in distress and even the terrifying witch. For the past two millennia, male producers have created the works of cultural construction that we have valued and admired and have defined our sense of beauty, history, taste, value, and heroism. In the world of art, and not only there, until recently, men have had almost exclusive access to creating our cultural heritage of images. And these patriarchal archetypes persist in our contemporary culture, shaping our ideas of not only beauty and taste but also national identity or political authority, sexuality and our deepest fears and expectations. The implications of these works hanging in art galleries shape our everyday lives: they permeate into our lives quite in an insidious way from fashion magazines, music videos, and advertisements selling products to young and adult people. Everyone living in the developed world is caught in the inevitable capitalist slip-stream of advertising and social media - where all these historical images of women shape and inform popular culture, from music videos to advertising for formula milk to album covers and fashion photography.

¹¹ Moreno, Mónica y Mira, Alicia: *Maternidades y madres: un enfoque historiográfico*, en *Discursos teóricos en torno a la(s) maternidad(es): Una visión integradora*, Coord. Silvia Caporale Bizzini. Ed. Entinema, Madrid, 2005, pag.19-61.

*Some media reference this legacy explicitly, from Beyoncé and Jay-Z's music video Apeshit, shot in the Louvre; to Reebok, ads ripping off Renaissance artist Boticelli to sell sportswear; to fashion and lifestyle shoots inspired by the horizontal and docile women in our art collections. Many more are influenced tacitly as our heritage of fine art, and cultural images become part of our shared visual language.*¹²

*There is even a very definite connection between the normalization of how women's bodies have been eroticized in our high arts and how that echoes in women's bodies are consumed in certain manners in our fast-moving culture.*¹³

See *The Rape of Europa* by Titian, painted ca. 1560–1562, a famous painting printed on tote bags, toiletries, cosmetic bags, and posters and postcards.

*I think that sort of image is celebrated for its frothy sensuality, its stylistic beauty ... without thinking about what it means to have an image that is normalized of a young Middle Eastern woman who is abducted to be raped by a male god in the act of forced and violent reproduction."*¹⁴

Same as in medieval times, there are also women artists who challenged these scripts with images that expose culture's misogynistic legacy and help us rethink the value of women's work and the politics of their pleasure of sexuality and power. Nevertheless, their work is significantly smaller: in the National Gallery, in a collection of over 2.300 paintings spanning the 13th to early 20th century, there are only 23 paintings by women.¹⁵ To mention a few names: Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (favourite painter of Marie-Antoinette, Paris, 1755), Rachel Ruysch (17th Century Holland), Rosa Bonheur (1822, Bordeaux), Artemisia Gentileschi (1593, Rome), etc.

At this point in our research, we have to mention an important author that has defended the concepts described above decades ago, in an early attempt to classify these stereotyped images of women: John Berger.

British cultural and literary critic John Berger published in 1972 his famous book "Ways of Seeing", which has sold over a million copies and still serves as a reference today. He was the first to set up a framework for seeing how images in everyday life, such as photographs and advertising echoed

¹² Catherine McCormack: *Women in the Picture: Women, Art and the Power of Looking*, Icon Books, 2021.

¹³ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoon/audio/2018808099/what-culture-does-with-women-s-bodies> (viewed on 13/10/21)-Catherine McCormack.

¹⁴ Idem 12.

¹⁵ <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/women-in-our-collection> (viewed on 14/10/21).

traditional and much valued images of Western European art, exposing many stereotypes regarding women. His iconic aphorism that in the history of painting "men act, women appear" neatly sums up the gendered power dynamic that women have been labelled on how they look rather than how they see. A woman has to survey everything she is and everything she does because of how she appears to others and ultimately to men.

Berger argues that traditionally, men and women have different types of social presence. Men are measured by the degree of power they display. The power may be in any number of forms, for example, moral, physical, economic. A man's presence suggests what he may or may not be able to do to or for you. In contrast, a woman's presence indicates what can or cannot be done to her. Her sense of being is replaced by a sense of being appreciated by others – ultimately men. He acts, she appears, and she watches herself being looked at. 'The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.'¹⁶

Often, she looks at the spectator looking at her. Her nakedness is not an expression of her feelings but that of the male viewer. Berger develops the distinction between nudity and nakedness. 'To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude.'¹⁷ In the average oil painting of the nude, the main character is never painted; this is the male spectator for whom everything has been done. Berger illustrates this point with the *Allegory of Time and Love* by Bronzino. In the painting, Cupid is kissing Venus, yet their bodies are arranged in a way that has nothing to do with them kissing. Her body has been contorted to present itself to the male viewer of the painting. The picture appeals to his sexuality. It has nothing to do with hers.

Despite the notion of the perfect nude being broken by Manet's *Olympia* and replaced by the realism of the prostitute, the unequal relationship exploited by oil painting is still deeply embedded in our culture and shapes the thinking of many women.

Today, the attitudes that created the nude can be seen in the mass media, and "the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed"¹⁸. The ideal spectator is still male, and the image is mainly designed to flatter him.

So, Berger clearly showed that women had been continuously seen and judged as mere sights through the persistent theme of the nude in the

¹⁶ John Berger: *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books, first Published by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books in London, 1972; current edition: Penguin Books, New York, 2008, p.47.

¹⁷ Idem 16

¹⁸ Idem 17, pag. 64.

European painting. Moreover, if we consider the story of Adam and Eve again, that is the first depiction of the nude tradition. For Berger, there are two crucial elements to this story. Firstly, having eaten the apple, they see each other differently, so nakedness was in the eye of the beholder. Secondly, the woman is blamed and made subservient to the man by way of punishment. During the Renaissance, the story disappeared, and instead, a single moment was shown, usually the moment of shame. However, the shame is directed more at the viewer than towards each other. Gradually, the shame became a kind of display. Even when secular subjects began to be used, the implication that the woman was aware of being seen by the spectator remained. As a result, she was not naked in her own right but naked as the (male) viewer saw her. Berger gives a range of examples: nudes looking at the viewer looking at them; women looking in mirrors joining in the spectacle of themselves; or looking into mirrors and being accused of vanity when in reality they only satisfy men's desire to see them naked. Common to all these images is the sense of the woman being watched; by men in the painting, by herself, by the spectator towards whom her body is often turned.

3. The relationship between classical oil painting and today's publicity. Today's Advertising image of women: temptresses and luring figures, positive and negative portrayals

All this world of women on display is a rich source for today's media and advertising, as we have already mentioned. John Berger has described a connection between European oil painting and publicity/advertising early on in 1972. Author Catherine McCormack has recently reopened the debate through her book and interviews this year in 2021.

According to Berger, publicity images often directly reference past art, either by copying it somehow or by incorporating the art into the publicity image. This 'quoting' of art achieves two things. Art is associated with wealth and beauty, and the publicity image benefits from this. Art also has cultural authority, which makes it superior to mere materialism. This use of art allows the publicity image to promote two almost contradictory things, spiritual or cultural refinement and consumerism. Publicity understands the link in oil painting between the work of art and the spectator-owner and uses these to flatter the spectator-buyer.

There is, however, a much deeper link to oil painting. The composition and visual signs used are very similar. Berger cites a list of examples:

- Stereotypical women, e.g. serene mother (Madonna), hostess (spectator-owner's wife), sex-object (Venus)

- The models' gestures
- The frontal arrangement of lovers for the benefit of the viewer
- The romantic use of nature with connotations of innocence
- Materials indicating luxury (metal, fur, leather)
- Wealth and virility conveyed by the stance of men
- Perspective used to offer mystery
- Drinking equated with success

For Berger, publicity is the culture of the consumer society, and there are reasons why it is inspired by oil painting:

- Firstly, oil painting celebrated private property; it expressed the idea that you are what you have. For this reason, publicity has not replaced post-Renaissance art; it is an extension of it.
- Secondly, it is nostalgic because its references to quality are bound to the past and the traditional. If it spoke in contemporary terms, it would be neither confident nor credible.
- Thirdly, it exploits the traditional education of the average spectator-buyer. Publicity does not need to make specific or accurate historical references; in fact, it should not do.
- Fourthly, color photography and oil painting are very similar in their ability to produce a sense of tactile reality to the spectator, reinforcing the sense of actually owning the thing (in the case of the spectator-owner), or the possibility of owning it (in the case of the spectator-buyer).

However, there is a fundamental difference between oil painting and publicity. Oil painting starts with facts, i.e. he already owns what is shown. It confirms the status of the spectator-owner and boosts his ego. Publicity diminishes the spectator-owner's ego; it makes him dissatisfied with his life (but not society). The spectator-owner made money out of the market; the spectator-buyer is the market and has money made out of him at two levels, as a worker and then as a buyer.

Publicity works on the fear that if you have nothing, you are nothing. Despite having spent our money, our lives will be richer by possessing more. The short-lived publicity image claims not that you are desirable or successful but that you will be. Sexuality is used, either explicitly or implicitly, by publicity to sell things. The message it conveys is that being able to buy is the same as being sexually desirable or loveable. Publicity works on the natural appetite for pleasure, something that is real. It does not, however, offer the pleasure as it is. Instead, it promises happiness, happiness gained by being envied by others, and this is glamour. It is not, therefore, offering pleasure in itself. The better the publicity, the more the spectator is aware of what they are missing. Yet, how does publicity remain credible if it never delivers happiness? It does so by being relevant to the fantasies of the spectator-buyer. The individual is trapped between what he is and what he

would like to be. And although tied to the concept of free choice, the freedom to buy this brand or another, the whole system of publicity is based on one proposal: that we can change our lives for the better if we buy something. The present is insufficient. Publicity images do not refer to the present, but the ideal future, where life is better. In effect, the publicity image has lowered the spectators' self-esteem and offers it back if they buy the product.

For Berger, the term 'publicity images' has the same meaning as advertising images. These images surround us, and that is unique to modern society. People usually believe that although advertising is everywhere, one can ignore it, tune it out, but it is not true. Advertising's influence is quick, it is cumulative, and mostly, it is subconscious.

Author Jean Kilbourne has an excellent definition of advertising: "Ads sell more than products. They sell values, images, concepts of love and sexuality, romance, success, and of normalcy. To a great extent, they tell us who we are and who we should be."¹⁹ From her documentary *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women*, this sentence sums up what Berger expressed earlier and continues to exemplify concepts of women's objectification and stereotyping with current famous advertising campaigns in mass media, visual media, and printed press. She asks the same questions regarding women as the previous authors and she elaborates an extensive research on what advertisers tell us about women. The answer is invariably similar to the predecessors: the most important thing is how women look.

The first thing advertisers do is surround us with images of ideal beauty. Women learn from a very early age that they must spend enormous amounts of time, energy and above all, money striving to achieve a perfect look and feeling ashamed and guilty when they fail.

"Advertising contributes to people's attitudes about gender, sex, and violence," states Jean Kilbourne in her article, *Two Ways a Woman Can Get Hurt*. With advertising agencies standing by the notion that "Sex Sells", it is not uncommon to find sex tied into many advertisements seen everywhere daily. The objectification of women in our society is more prevalent than many would like to believe. Women being portrayed as passive, easy, innocent, needy, submissive, and dependent creates an understanding that women are less human than men. And when advertisers continuously use women as sex objects in order to sell their products, they begin to form the mindset that "all women, regardless of age, are temptresses in disguise, nymphets, sexually unstable and seductive."²⁰

¹⁹ Jean Kilbourne: *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women*, documentary 2010, and *Can't buy my love: how advertising changes the way we think and feel*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.

²⁰ Jean Kilbourne: *Can't buy my love: how advertising changes the way we think and feel*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000, pag. 281.

We can see examples in many campaigns. A famous one is BMW's German automaker brand, 2008 advertising campaign for second-hand cars. The controversial ad was created by BBDO Greece and first published in Greece. This advertisement portrays a young, blonde, light-eyed female model lying in bed, looking seductively at the camera. The tagline of the ad, 'You know you're not the first. But do you really care?' promotes an explicit sexual connotation; it is emphasized that the young woman has had sex at least once before and that nobody should care about it. The ad has caused outrage in the advertising world because there is no car in the ad; instead, only a seductively looking young blonde woman. Most automotive companies utilize the sexual objectification power suggestions in their advertisements. Cars are like a 'sex' object. In general, since women are the ones to represent sexuality, women and cars are inseparable while forming an automotive ad's strategy. This ad has a strong use of sexual objectification of a woman being likened to a commodity-second hand car- and it is placing women again to an incompetent level as a sexual object. There are numerous other samples: especially campaigns for perfumes and the fashion industry, all very well known. See Pepe Jeans fall/winter ad from 2014, where a woman is literally put into the garbage bin or Dolce and Gabbana's extremely polemic ad from 2007 depicting the woman as an object, controlled by the four men around her. The sexual dimension of this photograph goes so far in the violence, that this scene has been assimilated to a gang rape by some people. The woman is maintained on the ground by a man above her, while the other three are watching, she seems completely dominated. And the list could interminably go on, with old and new examples, but the point has been made.

Conclusions

We have travelled from the beginnings, early medieval centuries to modern western art to see how the images and roles of women have evolved, both as males portrayed them and as authors themselves of artistic endeavours. We have reached the present times imaging in advertising. Moreover, we have seen that, although steps have been taken against objectification and stereotyping, women are still submerged in them, surrounded by misconceptions and fighting in a world of men. Nevertheless, the current social value system does not appreciate the stereotyping, gender inequality, sexual and useless images, objectification of women. It is now expected from companies to promote the mental aspects and capabilities for all genders in advertisements to avoid offensive reactions. There is a growing trend in advertising, termed as 'Femvertising', which appropriates women's value and their empowerment to encourage consumption; yet this strategy

needs further adapting by most brands and advertisers. Deliberately selecting degrading women images and ensuring that they are represented in advertisements repeatedly destroys social values and acceptance of equality between genders. With this, future research on the subject should be further conducted to analyze the impact of all the above elements in our culture and create more awareness to promote real change in society.

List of illustrations (Source: J. Paul Getty Museum Images, free of copyright)

Fig. 1. (<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/1407/unknown-nicolaus-of-prussia-vita-beatae-hedwigis-silesian-1353/>)

Unknown

Vita beatae Hedwigis, 1353, Tempera colors, colored washes, and ink on parchment bound between wood boards covered with red-stained pigskin

Leaf: 34.1 × 24.8 cm (13 7/16 × 9 3/4 in.), Ms. Ludwig XI 7 (83.MN.126)

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. Ludwig XI 7

Fig. 2. (<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/4032/unknown-maker-saint-hedwig-and-the-new-convent-nuns-from-bamberg-settling-at-the-new-convent-silesian-1353/>)

Unknown

Saint Hedwig and the New Convent; Nuns from Bamberg Settling at the New Convent, 1353, Tempera colors, colored washes, and ink on parchment

Leaf: 34.1 × 24.8 cm (13 7/16 × 9 3/4 in.), Ms. Ludwig XI 7 (83.MN.126), fol. 56

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. Ludwig XI 7, fol. 56

Fig. 3. (<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/2734/master-of-sir-john-fastolf-saint-anne-teaching-the-virgin-to-read-french-or-english-about-1430-1440/>)

Master of Sir John Fastolf (French, active before about 1420 - about 1450)

Saint Anne Teaching the Virgin to Read, about 1430–1440, Tempera colors, gold leaf, and ink on parchment

Leaf: 12.1 × 9.2 cm (4 3/4 × 3 5/8 in.), Ms. 5 (84.ML.723), fol. 45v

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. 5, fol. 45v

Fig. 4 (<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/255124/master-of-the-chronique-scandaleuse-denise-poncher-before-a-vision-of-death-french-about-1500/>)

Master of the *Chronique scandaleuse* (French, active about 1493 - 1510)

Denise Poncher before a Vision of Death, about 1500, Tempera colors, ink and gold

Leaf: 13.3 × 8.7 cm (5 1/4 × 3 7/16 in.), Ms. 109 (2011.40), fol. 156

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. 109, fol. 156

Fig. 5. (<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/3947/workshop-of-master-of-the-first-prayer-book-of-maximilian-mary-magdalene-with-a-book-and-an-ointment-jar-flemish-about-1510-1520/>)

Workshop of Master of the First Prayer Book of Maximilian (Flemish, active about 1475 - 1515)

Mary Magdalene with a Book and an Ointment Jar, about 1510–1520, Tempera colors, gold, and ink on parchment

Leaf: 23.2 × 16.7 cm (9 1/8 × 6 9/16 in.), Ms. Ludwig IX 18 (83.ML.114), fol. 264v
The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. Ludwig IX 18, fol. 264v

Fig. 6. (The Oxford History of Western Art, Ed. Martin Kemp, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000)

Ghent, *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, late 1940s, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek – Ms. 1857, Fol. 14v

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