

Article

*2025 2nd International Conference on Business Economics, Education, Arts and Social Sciences (EASS 2025)***A Study on the Representation of Women in Western Artworks from a Feminist Perspective**Yundi Zhao ^{1,*}¹ Theoretical Visual Culture Research of Art Studies at China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

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Abstract: This study examines Western artworks through the lens of feminism, aiming to uncover and critically analyze the depiction and status of women in art, along with their profound socio-cultural implications. From the mythological goddesses of ancient Greece and Rome to the humanistic portrayals of women in the Renaissance, the courtly beauties of the Baroque and Rococo periods, and the realist and impressionist representations from the 19th to early 20th century, these evolving images not only reflect shifting societal perceptions of women's roles but also encapsulate transformations in power structures and gender dynamics. The development of feminist theory and art criticism has further enriched this field, providing deeper insights into the ways women have been marginalized and objectified in art. Moreover, it highlights how female artists have actively challenged traditional narratives through their own creative expressions. Feminist art criticism extends beyond the analysis of women's representation in artworks, offering a critical examination of the underlying gender power relations and socio-cultural contexts. By reinterpreting Western art from this perspective, this research contributes to a broader discourse on gender equity, reinforcing the role of art as both a reflection of and a catalyst for social change.

Keywords: depictions of women; feminist perspective; western artworks

1. Introduction

The representation of women in Western art has long been a central topic in art history. However, for much of this history, depictions of women were largely shaped by the male gaze, often neglecting their own agency and creative contributions. The emergence of feminist theory has introduced new perspectives and analytical depth to this field. Since the late 19th century, feminism has continually drawn attention to gender equality, prompting a shift in art criticism from purely aesthetic considerations to a broader socio-cultural framework. Early feminist critiques exposed gender biases in art history, reevaluating the contributions of previously overlooked female artists. By the 1980s, feminist art criticism had expanded to interrogate the symbolic and objectified portrayals of women, as well as the sociopolitical structures underpinning these representations. In the 21st century, feminist art criticism has become increasingly multifaceted and inclusive, incorporating considerations of race, class, and sexual orientation in analyzing female artists' experiences. This evolution has not only enriched art historical discourse but has also fostered a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of women's representation in art. The continual development of feminist art criticism provides essential theoretical

Received: 22 February 2025

Revised: 27 February 2025

Accepted: 01 March 2025

Published: 02 March 2025



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support for advancing gender equality and promoting diversity within artistic and cultural narratives.

2. Feminist Theory and Art Criticism

2.1. Overview of Feminist Theory

Feminist theory emerged in the late 19th century and has evolved through multiple waves, gradually becoming a vital framework for analyzing gender relations and power structures. The first wave of feminism primarily focused on securing women's legal and political rights, advocating for suffrage and access to education. The second wave, which gained momentum in the 1960s, extended its critique to systemic gender discrimination, highlighting the various forms of oppression women faced within the family, workplace, and broader society. The third wave, marked by greater diversity, emphasized individual differences and intersectionality, exploring how factors such as race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status shape gender roles. Together, these waves have constructed a complex and dynamic theoretical foundation that enriches feminist art criticism. Feminist theory is not merely a critique of social injustice but also an assertion of female subjectivity. It seeks to expose the marginalization and objectification of women in art while highlighting the creative potential of female artists. For instance, art historian Linda Nochlin, in her seminal analysis of why female artists have been historically overlooked, sheds light on the structural gender biases embedded in art history. The integration of feminist theory into art criticism has expanded the discipline beyond traditional aesthetic criteria, shifting the focus toward the sociocultural contexts and gendered power dynamics underlying artistic production. This approach provides deeper insights and broader connotations in the interpretation of female imagery in art [1].

2.2. Development of Feminist Art Criticism

The rise of feminist art criticism has fundamentally reshaped the study and interpretation of art history. By the late 1960s, alongside the growing feminist movement, the art world began to confront issues of gender inequality and the representation of women in the arts. The early phase of feminist art criticism was dedicated to uncovering the systematic marginalization of women in a male-dominated art historical framework. One key moment in this shift was Linda Nochlin's provocative question, "*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*" which highlighted the deep-seated gender biases in art history. During this period, critics not only reassessed the work of forgotten female artists but also began to explore the power structures and symbolic meanings behind how women were represented in art. By the 1980s, feminist art criticism had expanded, broadening its analysis from issues of gender inequality to a more comprehensive sociocultural context. Critics started to explore how women were often symbolized and objectified in artistic works, focusing on the way their depictions reinforced passivity and helplessness under the male gaze. Gladys Himelfarb's interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* exemplified this shift, revealing the complex and multifaceted nature of female representation in art, reflecting both the perspective of male artists and the societal expectations placed on women. With the emergence of third-wave feminism, feminist art criticism became more inclusive and diverse. The concept of intersectionality was introduced, allowing scholars to consider how factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation shape women's artistic expression and recognition. Critics began to move beyond traditional aesthetic values, offering a sociocultural analysis that examined how women's works both challenge and redefine gender norms. One notable contribution from this period is Lea Allen's *Gender, Race, and Art*, which presents a rich analysis of women's artistic creations through several case studies, emphasizing the diversity and depth of their contributions. The evolution of feminist art criticism has not only reinvigorated the study of art history but has also provided a more nuanced, multi-dimensional lens through which to understand and appreciate the representation of women in art [2].

3. The Image of Women in Western Artworks

3.1. Classical Period

During the classical period of Western art, female figures were predominantly depicted as goddesses or heroines from mythology, often infused with idealized beauty and symbolic significance. Sculptures from ancient Greece and Rome, such as *The Birth of Venus* and the *Venus de Milo*, showcased women's graceful forms and perfect proportions, embodying an idealized vision of feminine beauty. However, beneath these idealized portrayals often lay a deeper layer of control and objectification. Venus, in artistic representations, was imbued with numerous noble qualities, but her image was primarily shaped by the male gaze, with few works genuinely exploring the inner lives and emotional depth of women. Furthermore, in the murals and sculptures of the classical period, women were frequently portrayed as gentle, obedient, or passive figures. For instance, the female characters in *The Laocoön Group* were depicted in anguish, but their pain and struggles were often minimized, with little emotional depth conveyed. This artistic approach not only reflected the stereotypical views of women in society at the time but also mirrored the reductive treatment of female roles by male artists in their works. Nevertheless, some works still conveyed the strength and independence of women. The image of Medusa in *The Head of Medusa*, for example, presented a powerful and mystifying figure, one whose intensity commanded awe. These more complex and multifaceted representations of women provided valuable material for later feminist art criticism, shedding light on the various meanings of female figures in classical art and the social and cultural contexts that underpinned them.

3.2. Renaissance

The Renaissance period marks a significant turning point in Western art history, during which the representation of female figures underwent a profound redefinition. Artists of this era shifted their focus towards realism and humanism, moving away from the idealized depictions of female beauty rooted in mythology. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* exemplifies this transformation, presenting a woman whose enigmatic expression and subtle smile invite reflection on the untold narratives beneath her surface. This portrayal not only emphasizes her physical beauty but also explores the complexities of her inner world. Despite these advances, however, female figures in Renaissance art were still largely depicted through a masculine lens. Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, for instance, celebrates the softness and sensuality of the female form, yet her posture and expression are deliberately constructed to appeal to the male gaze. Such depictions reflect the gender biases of the time and reinforce the subordinate position of women in the artistic sphere. Nonetheless, amid this context, a few pioneering female artists began to introduce fresh perspectives in their work. Sofonisba Anguissola's self-portrait, for example, asserts her identity as an artist while also conveying a narrative of self-awareness and independence. These trailblazing women challenged the male-dominated conventions of their time and created space for women within the artistic community. The artistic legacy of the Renaissance—whether through the works of male artists or the self-expression of female creators—provides rich material for later feminist critiques. These works not only reveal the complex and nuanced nature of womanhood but also expose the intricate gender power dynamics and the underlying sociocultural currents embedded within artistic representations.

3.3. Baroque and Rococo Period

During the Baroque and Rococo periods, the representation of women in art became more dynamic and extravagant, yet it also increasingly reflected heightened objectification and symbolic roles. Baroque art, celebrated for its dramatic intensity and emotional depth, often depicted women as larger-than-life figures. A prime example of this can be seen in Rubens' *The Life of Marie de' Medici* series, where women are positioned against

grand historical or mythological settings, emphasizing their beauty and nobility. However, these representations tend to lack individual depth, as women are often portrayed as symbolic figures, primarily created to appeal to the male gaze.

The Rococo period further emphasized the elegance and delicacy of female figures, as exemplified in Boucher's *Madame de Pompadour* and Fragonard's *The Swing*. In these works, women are presented with greater ornamental and playful qualities, generating a sense of lightness and joy. However, beneath this lighthearted exterior, women's marginalization and passivity in society remain evident. In *The Swing*, for example, the woman is depicted almost as an object of amusement, with her pose and expression crafted to draw the attention and admiration of those around her. This portrayal not only mirrors the era's rigid stereotypes of women's roles but also exacerbates their objectification.

Despite these dominant trends, female artists began to emerge during the Baroque and Rococo periods, offering a new perspective. Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun, for instance, celebrated the external beauty of women while placing greater emphasis on capturing their inner emotional worlds. Through works like her portraits of Queen Marie Antoinette, Vigée Le Brun revealed the complexity and multifaceted nature of women. These contributions by female artists serve as crucial resources for feminist art criticism, offering a more authentic portrayal of women's agency and value in art.

The art of the Baroque and Rococo periods, whether through the opulent depictions by male artists or the nuanced expressions by female creators, reflects the intricate gender power dynamics and cultural context of the time [3].

3.4. The 19th and Early 20th Centuries

From the 19th century to the early 20th century, the representations of women in Western art underwent significant transformations. This era of industrialization and modernization brought about shifts in social structures, leading to a re-evaluation of women's roles. However, the depictions of women in art remained heavily influenced by a male perspective. For instance, despite Millet's "The Gleaners" showcasing the arduous labor of rural women, the figures in the painting still adhered to traditional roles, symbolizing diligence and piety while lacking individuality and independence. Similarly, in Degas's series of "The Ballet Dancers," although the dancers exhibit graceful movements, their bodies are repeatedly dissected and objectified, serving as subjects for male artists. Nonetheless, this period also saw works that challenged conventional notions. Venus Férényi's "Nude with Cat," for example, portrayed the female nude not as an idealized, passive symbol but as a vibrant and expressive entity. Her work broke through traditional gender norms, revealing the natural beauty and inner strength of women. Additionally, Cassatt's "The Bathing Women" series, through meticulous depictions of women's daily lives, showcased their independence and autonomy. Cassatt's works not only captured the privacy and dignity of women but also conveyed profound insights into their lifestyles. These pieces hold significant importance in art history, representing not only technical innovation but also a redefinition of female identity and status. Artworks from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, with their complex imagery and diverse expressions, provide rich material for feminist art criticism, reflecting the social and cultural backdrop of a transformative era.

4. Analysis from a Feminist Perspective

4.1. Symbolization and Objectification of the Female Image

Under the feminist perspective, the representation of women in Western artworks is often symbolic and objectified, serving as a projection of specific societal concepts or male desires. From the Venus of the Renaissance to the sensual goddesses in modern advertisements, women's bodies and images have frequently been reduced to symbols of purity, seduction, or obedience. Such portrayals not only strip women of their subjectivity but also position them in a passive role as objects to be viewed and evaluated. For example,

Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* from the Renaissance presents an idealized image of women. Venus' nude body is regarded as the embodiment of beauty, yet this beauty is defined according to male aesthetic standards. Her gestures and expressions are gentle and soft, seemingly catering to the fantasies of the male viewer. This symbolic representation of women is prevalent in many classical works of art, where they are often portrayed as synonymous with meekness, weakness, and even powerlessness—stereotypes that continue to be reinforced in subsequent generations of art.

In the modern art period, the objectification of the female figure persists. For instance, Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe* series, while highlighting the mass cultural influence of female icons through repetitive imagery, also reduces Monroe's face and body to mere objects of consumption and worship. Although this approach is critical, it inadvertently perpetuates the objectification of women in society. Feminist artists have deeply interrogated and challenged this symbolization and objectification. For example, Joan Semmel's *Me Under the Bed*, where she reinterprets female sexuality and desire through an image of herself nude on the bed, features a gaze that is firm and confident. She is no longer a passive object to be gazed at but rather an active observer and thinker. This shift in perspective not only breaks traditional gender stereotypes but also imbues the female image with greater complexity and depth. Additionally, Susan Flint's *Perfect Moment* series, which focuses on the female body, uses partial close-ups and exaggerated treatments to challenge conventional beauty standards and highlight the diversity and irreplaceability of the female form. In a nearly provocative manner, these works disrupt the viewer's aesthetic expectations and compel a reevaluation of the meaning of the female figure.

4.2. Challenges to the Traditional Image of Women by Female Artists

Female artists have made significant efforts to challenge traditional portrayals of women, offering reinterpretations and presenting female roles from unique perspectives with strong expressive power. For instance, Frida Kahlo's self-portraits not only depict her external image but also offer profound reflections on her inner emotions and experiences. In *The Broken Column*, Kahlo exposes her physical injuries and mental anguish, breaking away from the traditional image of women as soft and docile, while presenting women's resilience and complexity. In the works of Caro, women are no longer passive objects under the male gaze but subjects of self-knowledge and self-expression. Her creations are imbued with a desire for freedom and independence, alongside deep reflections on female identity. Similarly, Joan Semmel's *I Under the Bed* redefines female sexuality and desire in a bold and direct manner. In this piece, Semmel's nude body is not an object for male consumption and gaze but an active observer and contemplator. Her gaze is firm and confident, revealing an extraordinary feminine power. This shift in perspective not only challenges traditional gender stereotypes but also imbues the female figure with greater complexity and depth. Semmel's works make it clear that women's sexuality and desires should not be suppressed or denied but can be boldly expressed and celebrated. Susan Flint's *Perfect Moments* series attempts to dissolve traditional beauty standards through partial close-ups and exaggerated depictions of the female body. In an almost provocative manner, she challenges the viewer's aesthetic expectations by revealing the diversity and irreplaceability of the female form. In Flint's works, the female body is no longer a singular, idealized symbol but a unique entity with personality and deep emotion. This artistic approach breaks the boundaries of traditional aesthetics, striving for greater diversity and inclusiveness of the female figure in art [4]. In Marina Abramović's performance piece *The Artist is Present*, she engages in a silent, prolonged stare-down with the audience, exploring the dynamics of power relations and emotional communication. Abramović's work challenges traditional portrayals of women in art by positioning them in an active, participatory role that forces viewers to confront their own gender biases and emotional responses. This direct interaction not only infuses the female figure with greater dynamism and depth but also enhances the interactive and participatory nature of the

artwork. The works of these female artists represent not only artistic innovation and breakthroughs but also a powerful impact on social culture and gender perceptions. Through their creations, they have redefined the role of women in art, challenging the long-standing male-dominated art narrative. The efforts of female artists have opened more space for women's voices and the right to self-identification in the art world, prompting audiences to reexamine and rethink the significance of the female image [5].

4.3. Socio-Cultural Significance of the Female Image

From a feminist perspective, depictions of female figures in Western masterpieces are imbued with rich socio-cultural significance. These works serve not merely as artistic expressions but also as profound reflections on the roles and statuses of women within society. For example, in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the disintegration and reconfiguration of female forms not only subvert traditional aesthetic norms but also suggest the multifaceted and fluid nature of women's identities. This multidimensional representation challenges rigid, one-dimensional portrayals of womanhood, thereby granting women greater freedoms and possibilities. The representation of female figures in art is often deeply connected to the socio-cultural contexts in which they are created. During the 18th and 19th centuries, women were frequently depicted as domestic figures or angelic presences, a portrayal especially evident in numerous domestic paintings. In Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*, the female figure, though radiating tranquility and gentleness, is primarily shown in the role of a household servant. This portrayal reflects the prevailing gender roles and societal expectations of the time, confining women to specific domestic and societal positions while neglecting their personal development and autonomy. However, with the advent of the 20th century and the rise of feminism, the representation of female figures in art underwent a profound transformation. For instance, contemporary artist Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series, through her mimicry of female figures across various historical periods, exposes the roles and predicaments women have faced in diverse socio-cultural settings. Sherman's works not only reveal the ways in which female images are constructed in media and culture but also illuminate the multifaceted identities and complex experiences of women in society. This method of self-fashioning allows viewers to see the societal pressures and cultural conventions that shape female representations. The portrayal of female figures in art not only influences public perceptions of women but also profoundly impacts women's sense of self-identification.

5. Conclusion

Through the study of women's images in Western artworks from a feminist perspective, the diverse representations of women across different historical periods and the profound socio-cultural significance behind them become clearly evident. The symbolization and objectification of women's images reflect the stereotypical perceptions of women within the male-dominated social structure, while the works of female artists offer powerful examples that challenge these perceptions. For instance, Mary Cassatt's late 19th-century paintings, which portray women's daily lives and emotional worlds, challenge the traditional, singular, and passive depictions of women. The application of feminist art criticism not only exposes the gender power dynamics embedded in artworks but also highlights the potential and creativity of female artists. Art, therefore, is not merely an expression of beauty but also a reflection of gender power relations. Future research should continue to focus on new representations of female figures in contemporary art and explore ways to further promote gender equality and diversity. Ongoing exploration in this field will not only provide new interpretative dimensions for art history but also contribute valuable intellectual resources toward building a more just and inclusive society.

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