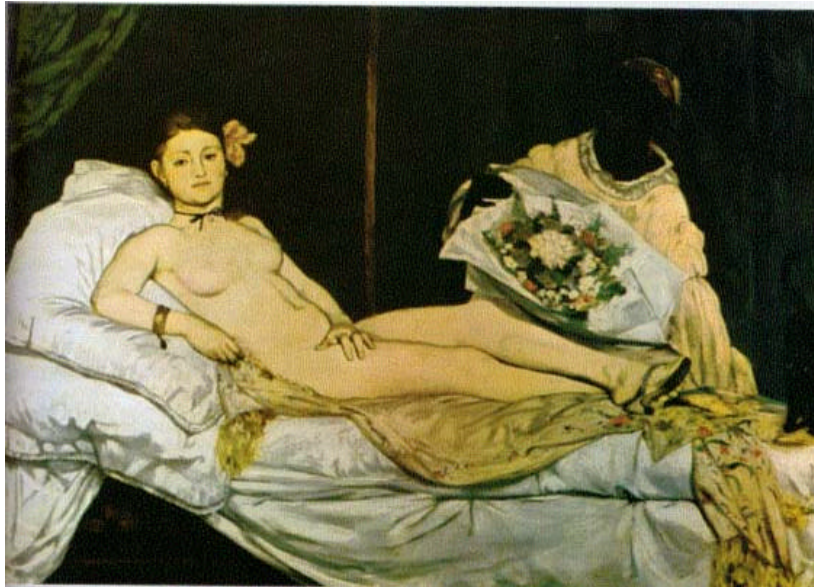


The Female Figure in Western Art

This essay will explore the treatment of the female figure in art from the renaissance to present within the context of the information presented in class. Within this timeframe the depiction of the female figure has changed drastically. This owes obviously to the changing artistic styles in western painting as it progressed from movement to movement, but also to more frequent representation of the female figure in art. The images that will be discussed in this paper are *Olympia*, by Manet ca. 1863; *The Three Brides* by Jan Tootop, ca 1893; *Girl Before a Mirror*, by Picasso, ca 1932; and *Woman, Sag Harbor*, by de Kooning, ca. 1964. The differences and similarities of these representations will be related to the issues of depiction presented in class.



Chronologically, the first painting in the list is Manet's *Olympia*. It is included to represent the realist tradition that was prevalent in Western Europe in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. This painting is a derivative of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, and because it is very similar in technique and composition, it will serve as our example for the time periods Renaissance through mid-19th century. Of course this is a very broad generalization of subject matter, but within the immense space of the stylistic representation of the figure (especially within the 20th century), it seems fair to group these periods as similar. It is after the "realism" of the mid nineteenth century, that depiction takes on interesting and rapid developments.

Here *Olympia* is depicted in her then-scandalous pose. In attempting to analyze the noteworthy elements of the composition first a strong figure ground separation is noticed. Manet manipulates the relative contrasts between light and dark to draw maximum attention to the figure and subdue the background. It is interesting to note the unnaturally deep shadowing of the servant's features. Her coloration, as well as the coloration of the cat, which together are the only other elements that would demand a viewer's attention, have been darkened to the point where only the closest inspection reveals the features.

This again emphasizes the prominence of Olympia. Beyond these compositional manipulations there is little noteworthy in the image from a cognition standpoint; the figures are rendered naturalistically and are easily identifiable, leaving the visual processing of the viewer's mind with little challenge. This painting, however, serves as good point of departure into the more expressive styles found in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

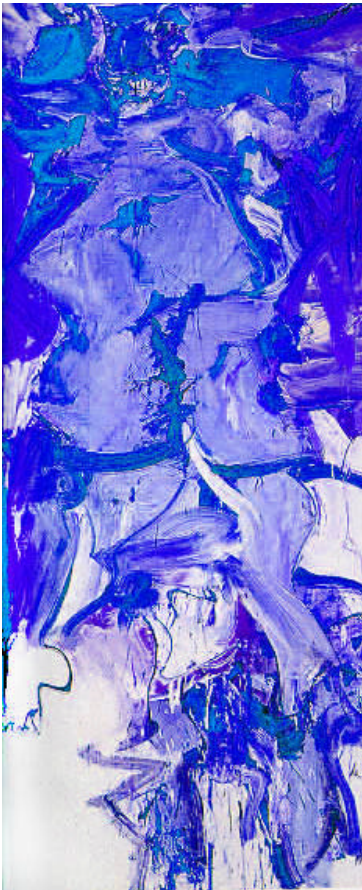


The second image, *The Three Brides*, shows strong characteristics of the Symbolist and Art Nouveau movements of the late 19th early 20th Century. This image is a black chalk and pencil drawing by Dutch artist Jan Toorop. With this image the female figure begins its obliterating progression into the art of the 20th century. Produced only 30 years after the Manet, the strong stylists influence of the Art Nouveau and the sensual provocation of the Symbolist movement combine to produce simple yet striking figures. The obvious characteristic of this work is its strong step away from the naturalistic treatment of the figure. The artist integrates the characteristic curvilinear forms of the art nouveau into the composition by abstracting the fairies hair into intertwined masses of flowing dark form. Toorop draws only enough to make each figure recognizable, forgoing unnecessary modeling and attention to natural form. His intention is not to detail the visual complexity of a figure as Manet and other realists did, but to only suggest it, in essence drawing what he knows and not what he sees, leaving the rest to the viewers visual system and cognitive abilities to assemble and identify. Such was one of the goals of the Symbolist movement, removing explicit representation from images and forcing the viewer's mind and imagination to infer the meaning.



This image, *Girl Before a Mirror* by Picasso, takes the figure on another step along the path started in the previous image. Compared to the first two images, Picasso increases the figure's abstraction leaving only the essence of the female form. Here Picasso presents a strongly colored composition that is marked by lines and forms. Initially, the viewer is oriented by the strong vertical line of symmetry that marks the division of the composition, the space between the reality of the painting and reflection of that reality. Picasso uses the repetition of forms, here predominately circles, to promote visual unity in the space. The coloration is powerful in its saturation, yet is able to provide a unifying influence on the composition because all the hues are similar in their saturation and brilliance. It is interesting that given only a few abstracted shapes properly arranged, the human mind is still able to identify the subject matter as a female form despite its unnatural coloring. This begs the question "at what point are the visual clues no longer sufficient to identify the figure?"

This, the last image, by deKooning attempts to answer the question posed above. What elements are necessary in an image to allow a viewer to recognize the subject matter? Looking at this image, what is recognized as belonging to a human figure? There are not the telltale symbols present in the Picasso, no eye, no fingers, not even a touch of hair. The only element that can be positively identified as human would be the coloration. The central mass is definitely a flesh tone, but is this clue enough to decipher the subject matter with no other context? It is easy enough to look at the image now, having gained context from the subject matter of this paper and the title of the piece, and realize that there is some obliterated human form in the image. With sufficient inspection one may notice two legs and maybe some semblance of a face. But, would these aspects come through without this context, or has deKooning pushed the abstraction of the figure beyond the capacity of human mind to recognize it? This remains an open question, and it is one of the beautiful mysteries that make art so challenging and the human mind so fascinating.



For thought: Given the same image by deKooning, slightly altered, and with no outside context would the image on the left be recognizable as a female form?

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