

CASE STUDY 2: THE FIGURE

How has the role of the female in art changed over time? Refer to a range of artist and cultures.

Over the course of history, the female figure has been depicted in art in a range of styles. This change in portrayal is the result of changes in cultural and societal values over time. The work of three artists in particular, when compared, show how the role of the female has changed in art; Titian, Édouard Manet and Willem de Kooning. Each of these artists vary in their cultural background, time they practiced and the way they portray the female in their art. By studying their work, it is clear how the role of the female in art has changed with time.

Tiziano Vecelli, Titian, lived from 1490-1576 in Italy, towards the end of the Renaissance. His work was heavily influence by Giorgione, and he paint figures in ideal settings, establishing moods of mystery, fear and passion. His work also has a clear sense of harmony and balance, created by the positioning of figures and perspective. In his practice, Titian explored the potential of oil paint, which was a new medium at the time. He has able to achieve rich colors through the layering of the paint, and through mixing soft blending stroked with free, vibrant strokes, he was able to effectively depict textures, such as the shimmer of satin, or the sensual glow of the skin. His forms were predominantly built with color rather than lines. In Titian's time, the female form was idealized when depicted, the people of the time favoring modesty, minimal body hair, pale skin, small breasts, and an overall well rounded figure. In order to display the female figure in such a revealing way, the artists, including Titian himself, would not depict any specific women, but label the figure as 'Venus', the goddess of love. This practice signifies an inconsistency in the culture of the time. Whilst the public accepted the female nude when portrayed within mythological context, the depiction of a particular women was considered shameful. It can therefore be said that the role of the female in art at this time, was to be a symbol of love and ideal beauty; and unattainable ideal. Whilst Titian's representation of the female nude differed from that of other artists of the time, through his establishment of the reclining nude in a new style, this ideal (societal influence) is also expressed in his work. One work which clearly shows this, is his '*Venus of Urbino*'. In the painting, Venus is shown lying peacefully, establishing a sense of calm and grace. She is the ideal female, with all the features valued by the people of the time. The positioning of her hand implies modesty, despite her seductive yet submissive gaze. The dog placed near her feet is a symbol of faithfulness, and the roses clutched in her hand, a symbol of matrimony. The positioning of the maids in the background balance the scene effectively, whilst also reinforcing her high status. This painting is one which established the idea of the reclining nude, but also shows the influence of society on the work of the artist, and the role of the female figure in the art of the time; to symbolize the ideal.

Édouard Manet, born in 1832 in France, was an artist who's unique and unconventional style compared to other artists of his time, was a significant stepping stone into the era of modern art. When compared with Titian, Manet's depiction of the female figure in particular, shows the change in societal values and ideals, and highlights the change in the role of women in art. In his practice, Manet focused on the interplay of light, color and texture, and he preferred to build up color than use black. He was known for depicting casual moments, without romanticizing them, and his paintings served as a record of his city and the people. The bold swatches/dashes of color left an 'impression' of what was seen rather than depicting it in actual detail, and by focusing on the interplay of light, color and texture, he

effectively adapted the role of art to a world that had just seen the introduction of the camera. It is therefore evident, that Manet's style varied in comparison to Titian's, particularly in the way in which he did not romanticize the scenes he painted. This also applies to Manet's depiction of the female in his works. The change in the role of the female and its portrayal in art can be seen with particular reference to Manet's work '*Olympia*'. In this painting, a reclining nude is once again depicted, although in this case, Manet used a professional model, with an unconventional demeanor that comes across in the work. Although, she too had the beauty of an ideal woman, with pale skin and a slender body, considered beautiful at the time, her depiction varies, in that personality and realism is evident. Manet had broken the tradition of painting her as an ideal, as she is shown real and natural, rather than unnaturally submissive and modest. This unconventional depiction was a threat to the public morals of the time, but was a turning point, and the result of a more contemporary view on the female figure and nudity. It can therefore be assumed that Manet was a key figure in changing the role of the female in art, breaking tradition, and eventually establishing a new norm.

Willem de Kooning, born in America in the early twentieth century, was another revolutionary in terms of the portrayal of the female in art, and redefining her role in the art world. Although de Kooning was trained in a traditional style, he seemingly abandoned this technique and adapted a more abstract style. He was heavily influenced by the work of Picasso, and worked a lot in abstractions early on in his career. In terms of his practice, de Kooning sensually handled the paint, painting spontaneously, swiftly and forcefully, each artwork an exploration of personal content in a unique style. His work is a combination of figuration with expressive gestural applications of paint. He often reworked on the same canvas, then areas were scraped off to show underlying elements. In terms of the role of the female in his art, de Kooning attempted to find a contemporary version of the beauty of ideal female icons. His depiction of women was very controversial. He placed a lot of emphasis on the gaze or expression of the figure in particular. His figures themselves were grotesque and distorted, and seem to be the complete opposite of those depicted in Titian's work, as he attempted to find a modern equivalent. Through examining his work, and the depiction of women in it, it is clear that de Kooning was another artist who had influence on the role of the female figure in history, with his contemporary take on beauty and the figure. The women in his pieces appear much more aggressive and overwhelming compared with the subtlety of Titian's portrayals. De Kooning's approach to the depiction of the female figure can be seen in his painting '*Woman V*'. The figure's body could be described as dumpy and almost threatening, with emphasis on the breasts and shoulders. The bared teeth and wide eyes, make her appear very intimidating and menacing, and looking at the painting for a long period evokes a sense of discomfort. The strong frontal stance and dumpy proportions, as well as a sense of solidity and lack of movement adds to this discomfort. Through this image, de Kooning's break away from the tradition of depicting women as graceful and alluring is clearly seen. This in itself signifies a change in cultural morals and consequently, the role of the female in art.

The role of the female in art has changed significantly over history. As time has passed societal values and morals have greatly changed, and this is evident through the study of the portrayal of women in art. Three artists which contributed to the change seen in this depiction, were Titian, Édouard Manet, and Willem de Kooning. Through the study of all three artists the change in the role of the female figure in art over the course of history becomes clear, as well as their contributions to this process.