

Gendered Violence and Female Rebellion in 17th- and 20th-Century Art

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Abstract. From classical mythology to 20th-century modernism, Western art has consistently shaped the female body as a site where aesthetics and violence intersect. This paper examines how male artists - from Rubens to Picasso and Hans Bellmer - construct narratives of gendered violence, positioning women as passive spectators or objects of the male gaze. Furthermore, it analyzes how female artists, such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Teresa Margolles, and Nan Goldin, actively challenged and redefined this visual tradition through media such as painting, textiles, and photography. Employing a comparative historical approach, this paper juxtaposes Baroque and Modernist works to reveal how patriarchal traditions continue to glorify female suffering, while female artists reaffirm the subjectivity of female narratives by placing resistance or the active exposure of scars at the core of their work. By comparing 17th- and 20th-century visual culture, this paper reveals both the persistence of the male gaze and the powerful subversion wrought by female artists. The conclusion is that the representation of violence against women in art history not only mirrors patriarchy but also serves as a battleground for female artists to resist and reconstruct female subjectivity through their creative practices.

Keywords: Gendered violence, female artists, resistance, male gaze, art history

1. Introduction

From classical mythology to Bible stories, the female body has been continuously visually transformed into an aesthetic object throughout Western art history. For centuries, male artists have produced a visual story through the male gaze, "his stories." In their narratives centered around violence against women, male artists have used violence as aesthetics and the unfolding of "entertaining" narrative plots. Whether in Baroque painting in the 17th century or arbitrary modernist production in the 20th century, the expression of male painters continued to reinforce existing gender power. It is interesting to note that Rubens' and Picasso's works share similarities: women are depicted as passive bodies that lack autonomy. In contrast, women artists have represented women with subjectivity and resistance through mediums like painting, textiles, and fashion. A historical comparison of these images shows a complex process of the female body being suppressed, reshaped, and at times reclaimed. This paper argues that by comparing works from the 17th and 20th centuries, we can trace how male artists have aestheticized gender violence, while

female artists have actively subverted this tradition by reasserting narrative agency and reclaiming the female body as a site of resistance.

2. Results

2.1. Gendered violence in 17th-century male art

2.1.1. Rubens and the aestheticization of sexual violence

Following the speed of religious reformation and political consolidation of power under the monarchy in 17th-century Europe, the Baroque era often came to express themes of conquest, destruction, and violence under the guise of morality and religious reconstruction - women are often depicted as targets of sexual violence in the Bible and mythology. For example, biblical scenes associated with sexual violence towards women include The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus and the abduction of The Rape of the Sabine Women. As Allison Kim discusses, religious and mythological subjects often provided a framework that normalized the visual depiction of sexual violence. In these visual messages, the nakedness of women was depicted as innocent under the guise of religious morals, allowing violence to be beautified as visual pleasure. In the works presented by Rubens, women were primarily depicted as passive victims. In both of these examples, the male artist masked the violent nature of the painting through a mastery of visual techniques that allowed the viewer to ignore the suffering of the women in the painting.

Peter Paul Rubens' painting *The Rape of the Sabine Women* exemplifies how Baroque painting maintained the visual character of gendered violence while allowing women to lose their subjectivity (fig. 1).

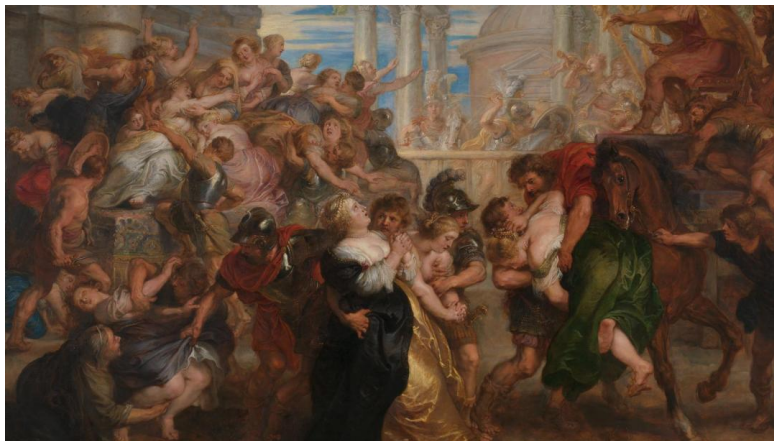


Figure 1. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1635–1640. Oil on canvas. Prado Museum, Madrid

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/peter-paul-rubens-the-rape-of-the-sabine-women>

The painting depicts Roman men forcing Sabine women to marry while it is full of chaos and drama - entangled bodies, flowing clothing, and twisted body placements. Although the women express fear, their resistance is not aggressive because the Rubens emphasize their softness rather than their pain. At the same time, Rubens enhances the scene through elegant composition: the diagonal composition and warm light transform the violence into a visually harmonious display, as this is the only way the violation depicted in the painting can be concealed [1].

For a further example of visualizing sexual violence in Rubens's oeuvre consider *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus*, 1618. Oil on canvas. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rape_of_the_Daughters_of_Leucippus

This painting depicts the myth of Castor and Pollux raping Leucippus' daughter. In the center of the image depicting the abduction are two nude women whose pale, fat body forms juxtapose the strong, muscular bodies of the men. While the two women lift their arms in resistance there is neither aggression nor violence in their expressions or bodies; their suffering, an expressed body, is clouded in the elegantly erotic nature of the image as if the artist is tacit in the belief that women can only succumb to gender violence. The idealized version of the victims glorifies the moment of abduction. The painting does not pretend to show fear, pain, or aggression - it shows the artifice of scenery representing violence that appeals to desire created from pleasure. Rubens establishes a visual culture dominated by men that aestheticizes women's suffering in beauty and naturalizes sexual domination in mythical narratives.

2.1.2. Artemisia Gentileschi and women's resistance

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* presents entirely the opposite version of gender violence - addressing women's resistance to patriarchal oppression, and in complement to Rubens's paintings (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith Beheading Holofernes, c. 1614–1620. Oil on canvas. Uffizi Gallery, Florence

<https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/judith-beheading-holofernes>

Based on Judith murdering Assyrian General Holofernes in the Bible, Gentileschi shifted away from sexiness and beauty and placed - determination - as the focus of the bodies, highlighting and expressing bodily struggle and emotion. Judith stabbed the sword into the left side of Holofernes' neck with her full might. Blood dyed the white sheets red without the audience, producing feelings of pleasure and revenge. Gentileschi's personal experience as a rape survivor provides the basis for the work's personal conviction [2]. Her Judith is not an ornamental heroine, but an agent of revenge and justice. While Rubens created paintings that portrayed female characters as victims in fancy dress, Gentileschi reclaimed the narrative discourse, depicting women as reliable actors and active participants in liberation.

Gentileschi's *Susanna and the Elders* also conspires to directly challenge the conventions of erotic subjects by deploying composition (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610. Oil on canvas. Schloss Weißenstein, Pommersfelden

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susanna_and_the_Elders_\(Artemisia_Gentileschi,_Pommersfelden\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susanna_and_the_Elders_(Artemisia_Gentileschi,_Pommersfelden))

Many male versions of the story Victim Susanna are centered in the vision, whereas Gentileschi's Susanna in the middle of the image is misaligned, and Susanna's lower half is covered by a white cloth, distracting attention from the female figure, rather than the bare skin leaving room for reverie. The elders comprise the entire center axis of the painting and their aggressive physical posture overwhelms the composition, drawing the viewer's focus away from the victimized and to the victimizer. Additionally, since a significant part of the elder figures comprised the top of the composition, their position, looking down on Susanna mirrors the power of inequality inherent in the narrative. Gentileschi's decision not to represent Susanna as an object of pleasure, but as a persecuted subject, is what sets this painting apart from the rest in gallery spaces filled with male paintings.

2.2. Continuities of the male gaze in 20th-century art

2.2.1. Picasso's *Weeping Woman* and the exploitation of trauma

From the 17th to the 20th centuries, the visual representation of women in male-dominated art changed, but not their function. During the Baroque period, mythological and biblical themes provided a cultural framework for artists who eroticized female suffering and rendered violence as a

spectacle of beauty. By the 20th century, artistic styles had evolved - while realism gave way to cubism and surrealism, the female body remained at the center of violence, was vulnerable, and was still used to project male desire, anxiety, or trauma. Violence became less literal and more symbolic, often embedded in disjointed images and distorted anatomy. The male gaze carries through both eras, recasting female suffering as a formal innovation.

Pablo Picasso's *Weeping Woman* is often interpreted in the media as a symbol of grief over war and political suffering, but the painting also carries deep gender implications (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, *Weeping Woman*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 60 × 49 cm. Tate Modern, London

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/picasso-weeping-woman-t05010>

The figure in the painting is recognized as Dora Maar - Picasso's lover, muse, and talented artist - and she is depicted in the painting as a fragmented, agonized figure: her features are disintegrated into jagged planes, and her mouth is frozen in a scream. The painting transforms the emotional breakdown of the woman into an object of display and masks individual grief with propaganda of political suffering. Significantly, Picasso's relationship with Maar was fraught with emotional manipulation and psychological abuse, with reports of physical violence between the two, and Dora herself later remarked, "All the portraits he painted of me were lies." [3] This context suggests that the work may express not only collective trauma but also the artist's pain in appropriating real women for visual and emotional effects. Like many male artists before him, Picasso transformed the female body and psyche into material - not to reveal the inner world of women, but to express Picasso's morbid inner world.

2.2.2. Hans Bellmer's dolls and fetishized violence

Hans Bellmer's *La Poupée* series is one of the most visceral images of gender violence in 20th-century art (fig. 6).

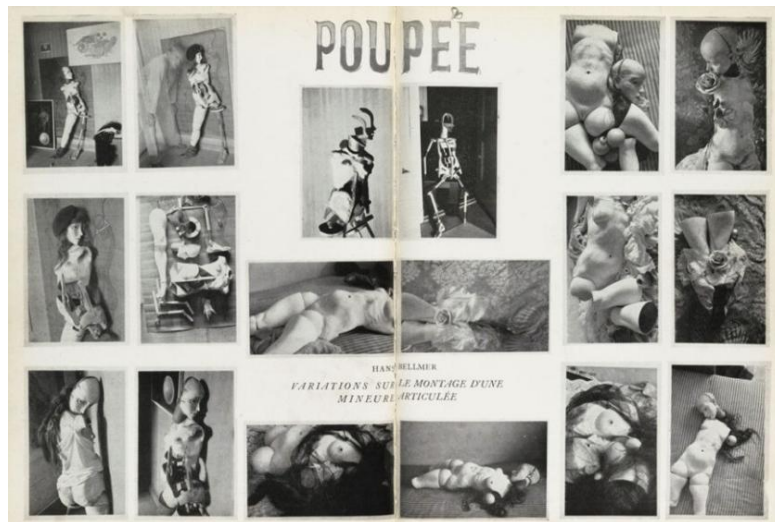


Figure 6. Hans Bellmer, *Poupée: Variations sur le montage d'une mineure articulée* (Doll: Variations on the Montage of an Articulated Minor), 1934. Mixed media sculpture

<https://smarthistory.org/hans-bellmer-the-doll/>

The dolls are lifelike, with interchangeable limbs, mutilated torsos, twisted joints, and the faces of adolescent girls whose bodies have been manipulated, divided, and fetishistically rearranged. Far from being innocent surrealist games, Bellmer reflects through his work a disturbing psychological landscape in which the female body becomes a site of desire and erotic violence. "Bellmer repeatedly recreates the experience of violence through his doll-creations ... They become fetishes in the second sense: compensatory objects for his castration fantasy ... The dolls help Bellmer maintain desire." [4] It is thus clear that Bellmer's treatment of the female body is a projection of sadistic desire, merging aesthetic experimentation with a desire for mastery. The dolls' bound poses and overexposed genitalia reduce them to mute, passive objects of control, and Bellmer undoubtedly pushes the historical tradition of objectifying and violently treating women to grotesque extremes.

2.3. Female artists' reclamation of narrative agency

2.3.1. Teresa Margolles: textiles as memory and collective resistance

At the same time, current women artists drew upon real-world trauma to engage with and subvert long-established visual traditions in objectifying women. Teresa Margolles is an example of this practice of employing trauma, and using blood-stained fabrics taken from the bodies of female victims to record the female body while moving it from being a passive object of display to a site of memory, and resistance (fig. 7).



Figure 7. Teresa Margolles, Tela bordada [Embroidered Fabric], 2012. Traditional Mayan embroidery on fabric by indigenous activists from Guatemala, 202 × 206 cm. Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, Ottawa

<https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/teresa-margolles/>

In Julia Skelly's article "Hard Touch: Gore Capitalism and Teresa Margolles's Soft Interventions", she describes Margolles's textile-based work as "soft interventions", which she uses to respond to gender-based violence through the tactile and bodily trace of materials [5]. The blood-drenched cloths, later embroidered by groups of women, become a mode of assignation to commemorative images and collective acts of resistance through labor. Margolles does not aestheticize or metaphorize the trauma, she presents the wounds and blood from actual bodies. Unlike scholars and artists like Bellmer or Picasso, who fragmented, abstracted, or emotionalized the female figure, Margolles offers corporeal reality and material evidence of bodily pain. She foregrounds emotionality and political solidarity between women, and textiles become home for resistance, eventually, a bearer of collective consciousness, and a way to engage with violence head-on.

2.3.2. Nan Goldin: photography as an autobiographical witness

Nan Goldin's photography represents one of the most intuitive vision approaches in contemporary art - one that meets gender violence challenges head-on in ways that others could not. She uses her camera to document up close her own body, emotional relationships, and traumatic experiences, which form the autobiographical works she creates. In *Nan One Month After Being Battered*, she looks squarely into the viewer's eyes, her face swollen with bruises and her eyes puffed, a pure image of the aftermath of intimate partner violence (fig. 8).



Figure 8. Nan Goldin, *Nan One Month After Being Battered*. 1984. Photograph

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/goldin-nan-one-month-after-being-battered-p78045>

In this image, there are no layers of metaphor or embellishment, only direct visual evidence. Unlike the objectification of the female body explored in the works of Bellmer or Picasso, Goldin reinterprets the theme of violence against women by directly showing her wounded face, instead of letting the audience spy on her trauma. Goldin is both the muse, the subject of the image of the victim of violence, and the narrator of the picture. By using the self as the center of expression, she further disrupts the narrative logic of traditional art in which the Other shapes the protagonist. In addition, Goldin's photographic works turn the camera to the inescapable violence itself, allowing the audience to face the costs of women in terms of gender-based violence and physical and mental aggression so that the condemnation intention behind his works is more obvious. It can be said that Goldin has transformed the suffering he has experienced into a visual language of resistance, care, and survival, encouraging countless women who have suffered violence to face their trauma, whether on the outside or inside.

3. Conclusion

Representations of gender violence in art history reveal a long visual tradition rooted in the male gaze, in which the female body is constantly aestheticized and objectified to serve the emotional and symbolic needs of patriarchal narratives. From Peter Paul Rubens to surrealist artists such as Hans Bellmer and Pablo Picasso, women have often existed not as subjects, but as projected vessels of male desire, anxiety, and control. Over the centuries, however, women artists have continued to disrupt this visual structure, reclaiming narrative power through radically different creative strategies. Whether it is Artemisia Gentileschi's fierce portrayal of justice, Teresa Margolles' testimonies to the trauma of reality, or Nan Goldin's in-your-face presentation of private suffering, these works reveal the deep costs of violence and give voice to resistance from the wounds themselves. These works do not consume or glorify pain but rather ask the viewer to acknowledge, remember, and confront the violence itself. In a sense, the history of gender-based violence against women in visual representations of art is not a single thread; rather, it is more like a tapestry woven together by male artists. Women artists have been silent within it, but are now reclaiming their

voices. This “tapestry” of women will only be truly broken when women choose to reiterate their experiences and perspectives.

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