By now you have undoubtedly become conversant with the key terms and concepts in relation to gender studies. You must have discovered and learnt that issues of gender impact and infiltrate all aspects of our existence—there is no getting away from it. In various units of MWG 001 and MWG 002, you have already studied the difference between sex and gender and engaged with the idea that gender is not something we are born with but something that is socially and environmentally constructed. The way in which our gender is constructed determines almost everything we do: how we dress, our physical behaviour, the language we use, our interactions with our family, friends, and our demeanour in the professional and educational spaces we inhabit.

If gender affects everything then surely it plays a role in our cultural productions—art, sculpture, cinema, architecture, dance—as well. Think for instance how society reacts to the idea of a boy wanting to learn bharatnatyam or a girl wanting to become a drummer in a rock band. Gender stereotypes and notions of propriety (what is appropriate behaviour for which gender) can put constraints on us that we do not even notice or acknowledge. However, the question of gender goes beyond the issue of what creative fields are available or closed to which gender. If we are to carry out a detailed and nuanced analysis of the relationship between...
gender and art we must also address questions such as: how is gender constructed in and through art? Does our gender determine our response to art? These are some of the central issues that we will take up in this unit.

As you can imagine, this terrain is a vast one, particularly because men and women have always produced art. It would be impossible for us to discuss all artistic corpuses from across the centuries and across the globe. This unit will, therefore, selectively give you a sampling of some major landmarks in western art history, starting with the Renaissance, and draw your attention to the ways in which gender functions within these.

### 3.2A OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Define the relationship between gender and art;
- Analyse the representation of art and response to art;
- Evaluate how gender functions in the major landforms of art history;
- Describe the variety of paintings and sculptures; and
- Compare and contrast art and sculpture of the Western world during Renaissance and after that.

### 3.3A RENAISSANCE PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

When considering Western art it might be useful for us to begin with the Renaissance. The Renaissance was a cultural-literary movement in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries. Some of the greatest and most popular writers (Shakespeare, Marlowe, Sidney, Spenser) and artists (Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Botticelli) lived and worked at this time, transforming forever the cultural heritage and artistic practices of the world. The word Renaissance literally means “rebirth”. You may ask what was being reborn at this time. It is difficult to explain the magnitude of the developments taking place, but for the time being let it suffice to say that new ideas and developments in literature, art, and politics were overtaking a traditional, medieval system of thought. For the first time a secular art and literary corpus (plays and poetry) developed that was not entirely contained by the demands and prescriptions of the church. Even religious art (art sponsored by the church) or poetry (Donne’s religious sonnet’s for instance) gave expression to a whole new understanding of the relationship between the human being and God. And ultimately, the whole conception of what it meant to be human/mortal underwent a drastic revamping. In other words, man himself was reborn as ‘Man’ during the Renaissance. As you can see, we cannot escape gendered terms such as “man” since these were very much ingrained in the culture of the times.
3.3.1A Renaissance Religious Arts: Divine Masculine Figurines

We will begin this unit, therefore, by examining the construction of ‘Man’ in Renaissance paintings and sculptures. The examination of these will enable us to determine the constitutive values, politics and ideologies of this age. The necessity of “reading” cultural artefacts lies in the fact that through them we may uncover the foundational “inner” principles of the historical-cultural moment in which they were produced. It is crucial to remember that artworks are never simply the result of individual artistic genius at work. The artist’s creation is always symptomatic of the prevalent ideas of his/her age. Furthermore, the artist’s work must be understood as contributing to and intervening in the world in which it is produced and consumed.

With this background let us take up the figure of the male nude that has come to epitomise the Renaissance dream. The High Renaissance gives us Michelangelo’s David.

![Fig. 3.1: Michelangelo’s David. Source: @upload.wikimedia.org](image)

The first thing that strikes us about this statue is the overpowering ‘full Monty’ effect. Here’s a 17 feet tall Biblical figure, sculpted out of marble, brandishing a full frontal nudity that vehemently asserts male physicality. The open celebration of the disrobed body of an archetypal Old Testament prophet-patriarch becomes a striking and unabashed celebration of the body and disrupts the post-lapsarian correlation between nudity and shame. Located in Florence, Italy, this figure of solitary splendour, magnificently symbolised a towering and defiant individualism. The sheer scale of the sculpture epitomised the human agent shedding his medievalist self-effacement, no longer afraid to take centre-stage as an epical, titanic
superman. It is clear that Renaissance man surmounts the legacy of the Fall, as the nude body is ‘reborn’ in its perfect, dignified and beautiful avatar.

We deliberately use the word ‘beautiful’ to describe Michelangelo’s David because the David is both beautiful and male. Despite the ‘masculine’ elements of the figure - etched sinews, flexed muscles - the figure symbolises the Renaissance-art ideal of beauty - something that is seen conventionally as a ‘feminine’ attribute today. Importantly, this ‘universalism’ of being is deeply Renaissance in its ideal of a unified, holistic view of human possibility. Caravaggio’s Bacchus also typifies this androgynous quality: his body is muscular but his face is flushed and rather effeminate. Such a conception of the male is pagan and pre-Christian. Additionally, the figure of the ‘beautiful male’, by compromising an unmitigated ‘virile’ aggressiveness, shakes to the core homophobic fears of emasculation and feminization.

Another example of the male nude is Michelangelo’s fresco (painting on wall), Creation of Adam, on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. This centrepiece fresco sums up the full glory and significance of man’s arrival in the newly created world, opposing Calvin’s Puritanical assertion of man’s irredeemable sinfulness. In this, God and his heavenly family of angels and cherubs together occupy one half of the frame; the other half is taken up and dominated by a single figure: that of the easily reclining Adam. Adam is at perfect ease in the divine presence, proudly and easily nude in his relaxed and unselfconscious, self-accepting posture.

Far from being cowed by God’s presence and authority, Adam’s laid-back body language bespeaks a confident assurance that the Creator needs him as much as Adam needs the Creator. God’s outstretched arm and hand, reach out for Adam’s, sign of a deep relationship. And it is the newly forged relationship of equality and intimacy between Man and his Maker that is foregrounded.
These seemingly subversive and secularizing narratives of the *David* and *Creation of Adam* are made possible by the fact that these masculine figures embody the politico-religious liberality of the Renaissance. As a result, two Biblical figures get re-configured as ideals of beauty and human agency, an androgynous nudity and sexuality that can stand/lie fearlessly even in the presence of God.

If, on the one hand, the perfect male-nude dominated Renaissance art, on the other hand, the broken and beleaguered body of Christ and other Christian martyrs captured the imagination of all artists. Just as the idealised male body expresses the progressive ideological tendencies of the Renaissance, the battered bodies of the saints articulate another politics that reveals a whole new face of the Renaissance.

### Check Your Progress 1

1. **Point out at least five differences of portrayals by using examples from religious art.**

2. **How would you view male nudity in Renaissance religious arts? Explain.**

### 3.3.2A Renaissance Religious Arts: Portrayal of Sufferings

Artists through the medieval age and the Renaissance tirelessly depicted the unjust persecution visited on Christian martyrs by Roman soldiers and commanders. You can check out some of these examples like, Michelangelo’s *Crucifixion of St. Peter*, or Caravaggio’s *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* and *Flagellation of Christ* in the hyperlinks given in References section at the end of the unit. These horrific and gory portrayals of suffering were, as one might imagine, never an end in themselves, in that they were not merely an unmitigated celebration of the heroism of the martyred saints. The lessons that the audience were supposed to take home after witnessing a ‘moment’ of martyrdom (albeit in and through art) were far from purely religious ones. The suffering of the martyrs became a module to instil in the people the patience to endure not religious, but a different kind of suffering - the secular kind - the roots of which lay in feudal economic deprivation and political disempowerment.

The trope of the early Christian martyrs was now reconfigured in body-imagic art representations as meek embodiments of uncomplaining suffering enjoined on a ‘true’ Christian. Caravaggio’s *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* (1599-1600), for instance, entirely elides and bypasses the early Christian
martyr’s potential for radical resistance, depicting him instead as a helpless victim, ineffectually raising one hand to stop his assassin from landing the final blow. Prone on the ground, with his tormentor looming large over him, he is divested of agency and has no option but to accept the leaf of martyrdom held out by the angel on the cloud above. The same helplessness of the martyr is foregrounded in Caravaggio’s *Crucifixion of St. Peter* (1600) as well. St. Peter here is reduced to a powerless being, desperately trying to raise his torso to examine the details of his own crucifixion. One might go so far as to suggest that the Church, deploying the power of the image, is here implicitly reminding the ordinary medieval individual that his/her condition is no different, and has no reason to be. There is little he can do or indeed ought to do to change the fate meted out to him by a divinely ordained fate. For to rise up in rebellion would be tantamount to rejecting the martyrdom handed out by the hovering angel, and to question God’s plan for our life. The best and perhaps only option available to the individual, therefore, is a quiescent and fatalistic one: to lie back, much like St. Matthew, and await God’s hand of mercy.

As you can see from the above discussion, artistic representations of the male body are never apolitical. The body of the gendered subject is always enmeshed with and embedded within a particular politics. The masculine body is not just an aesthetic, abstractly sexualised entity. It is constantly appropriated by artists in ways that turn the body into a site through which other ideological impulses can be read.

### 3.3.3A Other Renaissance Arts: Divine Feminine Figurines

The arguments made with regard to the depiction of the male body can also be made about women in art. The most fascinating aspect about the representation of women in Renaissance art is the multiple ways in which artists have approached the treatment of the body. At one end, we witness the sexualisation of the sacred, the divine, while at the other end of the spectrum we encounter the artist’s desperate attempt to sublimate female sensuality. Let us first consider this second tendency.

A useful thing to remember about the Renaissance is that it found a lot of its inspiration and subject matter for art, philosophy and literature in Classical knowledge (Greek/Roman). The Renaissance also meant a revival of ancient traditions and ideas. As a result, Renaissance artists avidly painted Classical personages – both historical and mythological.

Venus, the goddess of love, was one such favourite subject for artistic enterprises. The Renaissance’s artistic corpus overruns with glorious and magnificent representations of Venus, captured in all her splendour, for instance, Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*, Giorgione’s *Dresden Venus* and Titian’s countless paintings of the goddess.
In Botticelli’s *Primavera*, Venus is the central figure in the midst of a whole host of other mythological figures. While all the other characters are ‘active’, in that they are *doing* something, Venus, stands mutely and somewhat passively, objectively observing all the action surrounding her, never participating in it. The painting depicts Zephyr’s rape of Chloris, the latter’s transformation into Flora, Mercury pointing heavenward (a neo-platonic sign reminding us that the highest love is the love for God), and the three Graces, interlocked in a circular formation that is a sign of mutual, reciprocal love. In short, all kinds of love find space in this painting - from the carnal to the divine - and yet, Venus, who by virtue of being the goddess of love is the cause of all this action, stands distanced and separated from all of it. She’s converted into a Marian figure: Christian, chaste, asexual and ‘pure’.
Visualising Gender

On the other hand, Giorgione’s painting Dresden Venus (also known as Sleeping Venus) radically alters the figure of Venus. For the first time we have a female nude in a reclining position. There is an underlying sensual implication in the painting as well, created by Venus’s raised arm and the placement of her left hand on her groin. The landscape in the background mimics the curves of the woman’s body and this turns the human physiognomy into a natural, organic entity, in harmony with its surroundings. Venus’s face and body are not abstract and inhuman or unrealistically idealised as in Botticelli. Instead they are infused with warm, blended tints which add reality and decorative richness to her being. The painting arouses the viewer’s sexual interest which is matched by Venus’s attitude of modesty as she attempts to conceal her body. Titian’s paintings bring even more depth and character to the figure of Venus. Giorgione’s Dresden Venus, set against a natural landscape, is markedly domesticated in Titian’s Venus of Urbino.

The pastoral deity is now located indoors. If Giorgione’s Venus was passive, withdrawn, dreaming and inaccessible then Titian’s Venus is seductive, alluring and directly communicating with her audience - her gaze is focussed on the viewer outside the painting while Giorgione’s Venus’s eyes were decorously lowered. The Venus of Urbino reveals no coyness, hesitation or sexual prudery. Like Giorgione’s painting, here too Venus’s hand is placed on her groin. In this case however, instead of trying to cover it she seems to be drawing the viewer’s attention to her private parts.

In a slightly different painting, in the painting Venus Blindfolding Cupid, Titian brings in an even greater variation. In this painting Venus is fully clothed and no longer lying down. Her hair is neatly tied - a symptom of her new role in the artistic schema. She is no longer an intimidating beauty; her function is that of a maternal figure, chastising and managing Cupid. An art critic, Erwin Panofsky says that this picture achieves the ultimate resolution of the conflict of terrestrial and celestial love between Eros and Anteros (Panofsky, 2004, P. 255-257). These paintings that depict Venus occupied in the rituals of motherhood and domesticity work to humanise a female figure that has traditionally been abstracted and dehumanised through idealisation.

Furthermore, the Renaissance sought to unify what had been a split between the body and the soul during the Classical age. Plato in the Symposium tells us that there were two Venuses - Venus Coelitis (celestial) and Venus Naturalis (vulgar/natural). The love associated with the former was one that inspired men to better themselves. Venus Naturalis, on the other hand is affiliated with wealth, status and heterosexual, sensual love. Her love is earthly and physical rather than spiritual and of the soul. As is evident from the paintings of Renaissance artists they did not automatically rever and prefer Venus Coelitis. Instead the Renaissance offered an ideal that was an amalgam of the two: the body was no longer denied or decried in favour of the soul.
Bernini’s magnificent and complex sculpture, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, illustrates this combination of the sacred and profane poignantly. St. Teresa’s parted lips, closed eyes and limp limbs are very sexually suggestive. It seems that the female saint is waiting to be ravished by the angel suspended over her, holding the arrow that will pierce her heart. The violent movement of her robe is indicative of her state of mind. Her whole body is in a state of tension and seems simultaneously to be lifeless. This combination of the mystical with the sensual is clearly visible in the literature of the period as well. Donne’s poetry for instance clearly establishes the necessity and equal importance of both the body and the soul for a fulfilling life and ultimate salvation.

There is another ‘mother’ figure, besides Venus (Cupid’s mother), that looms large upon the artistic corpus of the Renaissance. Christ’s mother, Mary, captures the imaginative appeal of the painters almost as much as Christ himself. Michelangelo’s famous sculpture, *Pieta*, captures Christ in all his humanness and mortality. Yet, his mother, whose arms he lies in, captivates our attention just as much as the son does. Subtly her body expresses both the strain and trauma of supporting her dead son and a sense of dire futility, waste and helplessness, conveyed through the gesture of the empty right hand that seems to be questioning the purpose of this sacrifice. Interestingly, Madonna’s face is marked by a haunting passivity and expressionlessness. This is a moment that requires no depiction of overt emotion - the grief is beyond the demonstrable.

Even more fascinatingly, Mary looks even younger than Christ in the sculpture. A subversive reading of the work might lie in arguing that Mary and Christ seem to share a relationship. While this may seem like a blasphemous suggestion several art critics have observed that “Most Italian Madonnas are emotionally alike, alike under the skin. They seem to be either joyous or
pensive, their expression of emotional is muted...But this loving mother is also her Son’s daughter and his consort” (Goffen, 1999, P. 35-69). Similarly, Julia Kristeva suggests that Mary embodies a “gathering of the three feminine functions (daughter-wife-mother) within a totality where they vanish as specific corporealities while retaining their psychological function” (Kristeva, 2010). What seems plausible to propose is that these representations of the Madonna rescue her from a strictly scriptural rendition and recover her humanity.

3.4A RENAISSANCE PAINTING AND SCULPTURE: WOMEN IN ART

The Renaissance not only started the trend of secularising religious, divine feminine figures but also popularised the convention of choosing secular, non-religious female subjects as worthy of artistic depiction. The most famous woman in the history of art is the Mona Lisa. Maria Constantino says that “The key to the painting’s success is the very ambiguity of her expression, and the question of whether or not Mona Lisa is smiling. Whatever our interpretation, we remain transfixed by her gaze.” (Constantino, 2005, 14-16) Like the Venus of Urbino, Mona Lisa’s eyes draw the viewer into her world. Nevertheless, Leonardo da Vinci manages to create a sense of distance between the sitter (the woman) and the observer. This separation, ironically enough, is also created by the expression on Mona Lisa’s face. It’s important to consider that this portrait is not of the most beautiful woman. There are far more ‘perfect’, feminine, gorgeous women that can be found in art history. The enigmatic quality of Mona Lisa does not lie, therefore, in an obvious, in-your-face, over-the-top beauty. What contributes to its mystified reputation is its quiet ambiguity.

Fig. 3a.6: Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa. Source: @upload.wikimedia.org
Mona Lisa is a not-so-young married woman. Interestingly, however, the wedding ring is absent from her hands in the painting. Even more, despite her marital status, there seems to be a sense of loneliness and isolation about her - reflected in the unsettling look of sadness in her eyes. All we have to do is to recall Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (written a couple of centuries later) about Dukes’ wives in Renaissance Italy, to know the precarious lives that women led. At the very least, their lives weren’t very exciting or fulfilling. It is precisely this sense of deprivation that haunts the Mona Lisa. There is a social formality in her posture - folded hands that convey a public pose. Yet, her face concedes to a hidden reality.

Most puzzling is the half-smile that evocatively escapes her lips - a devilish, lopsided smile. What is its meaning? Is there a touch of seduction in her face, an invitation to the viewer or is it a look that declares closure, a refusal at accessibility, a disallowance of communication? We might suggest that she does both - there is an invitation to the viewer in that her face forces us to ask questions about her, to her, tempts us to unravel her puzzle, delve into the recesses of her subjectivity. Simultaneously, however she also sets a limitation on her viewer; ultimately she will not allow absolute access and will choose to remain silent.

Mona Lisa’s complex subjectivity becomes even more enthralling when we consider the fact that in most art women are either deified and sanitised (through the attribution of divinity) such that we get squeaky-clean depictions of women, or women are objectified by associating their bodies with luxuriant tapestries and jewels. In the Mona Lisa however the ‘object’ becomes a subject with a narrative. True, that the narrative isn’t quite audible or decipherable. Yet, this portrait forces us to ask why she cannot speak, why the story of Mona Lisa is ineffable. The portrait pushes against the boundaries of the conventional: the woman in it is not containable within traditional tropes. Here, the woman is bursting with a story, a narrative, a feminine human tale but the confines of the convention won’t allow the telling of her secrets; hence her silence and indecipherability. Such a reading makes it impossible for us to disparage women like Mona Lisa as deliberately seductive and mysterious. Their mystery is an imposition we - who do not allow women to speak or care to listen - subscribe to them. There’s no religious secret or power that underlies her depiction. Mona Lisa is entirely secular. This then becomes an absolutely human portrait of a woman pulsating with life, yet confided by the world she inhabits to remain nothing more than an enigma.

A similar partial-representation of female subjectivity can be found in the works of Rembrandt and Vermeer - two Dutch 17th Century painters. With the Dutch painters art begins to move inwards and choose interior spaces and domestic sites for representation. Simultaneously there is a corresponding movement into the mind of human subjects as well. Since women are the
ones who predominantly inhabit interior spaces, it is no surprise that these paintings begin to enter the interior landscape of feminine consciousness. In Rembrandt’s *A Girl Leaning on a Window Sill* we have the image of a very young girl looking out onto the world that is most likely not available to her. She can only reach it from within the confined interior space of domesticity. Her eyes convey a longing for what lies outside and also knowledge that her heart’s desire cannot be fulfilled. In another painting, *A Woman Trying on Earrings*, Rembrandt gives us a very realistic depiction of a woman occupied in an everyday, ordinary activity. Usually, images of women adorning themselves came loaded with moral connotations which were meant to convey a maxim against vanity and seduction. Here, however, the woman is an ordinary woman, taking pleasure in a small trinket. She is no great seductress looking to lure the viewer. She’s self-sufficient and self-engrossed: for the first time, it seems, women needn’t reach out to something beyond the self for a validation of their existence.

With these painters there is also a sudden proliferation of images in which women are engaged in literary, intellectual activity – still ‘simple’ mental activity of course, like reading a letter or writing one. Nevertheless it is, in a sense, the first time that women’s intellectual life begins to get acknowledged in cultural production. (See paintings like Vermeer’s *A Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window*, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, *A Lady Writing a Letter*, and Dirck Hals’s *Woman Tearing up a Letter* in the hyperlinks given in the References section at the end of the unit.) In *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* the pregnant woman’s mouth is slightly open making it seem like she is gasping in shock. The way in which she is clutching onto the letter – both her hands are tightly clasping the letter as though she is afraid it might slip out of her hand – combined with the blue clothing and background create a melancholic, slightly gloomy atmosphere. Here, too, the audience is intrigued into asking several questions that would entail a desire to enter feminine subjectivity.

Jane Gallop in a fascinating article discusses a special issue of the journal *Critical Inquiry* titled *Writing and Sexual Difference: The Difference Within*. The cover of the issue has the picture of a seated woman, licking an envelope and in front of her on the desk lies a letter (Mary Cassatt: *The Letter*) the back cover is a drawing of Erasmus writing a book. Here is what Gallop says about the illustrations: the man in the picture is in fact Erasmus, who is the father of our humanist tradition and the woman is without a name. In the man’s background of books, the woman sits against floral wallpaper, and this is echoed in reverse by her patterned dress (Gallop, 1982, P. 797-804). The most significant difference between the two illustrations is that the man holds a pen to paper. His pen is like the scissors hanging on the back shelf behind him - incisive, penetrating and violent. Both the pen and scissors are symbolic of masculine sexuality.
Tragically though, even the privilege of writing letters is not allowed to all women. Vermeer’s paintings reveal how the right to write letters is available only to women of a certain class. There is a class of women who write letters and a class of women who serve those who write. Writing is not just an action or work of the spirit, it involves material requisites, for instance the paintings like *Mistress and Maid*, *The Love Letter*, *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid*. Traditionally, the maid carries letters between the lady and her beloved. Not only does the maid make possible the act of writing (presumably she is the one who has got the quill with which the mistress is writing, has provided the paper etc.), but also labours to make love possible by acting as the go-between between the lovers. Because the maid provides the prerequisites for the writing of the letters we might even claim that she becomes the source and inspiration for the love letters. If we are to make a deconstructive reading of these paintings it is possible to show how even though the maid is not the recipient of love, by virtue of the fact that the letter is handed over to her and received by her, she becomes a quasi-lover. These paintings, therefore, open up the possibility of reading a subversive homosexual bond that exists between women of different classes who share a domestic space.

For the first time, art accommodated the lives of working class women. Vermeer’s *The Milkmaid* and Rembrandt’s *A Girl with a Broom* are excellent cases in point. The latter painting is able to immediately draw our attention to the doubly subaltern position that domestic workers suffer from. Because she is a girl she is condemned to live out her life completing domestic chores - something she must start learning very early in life. Additionally, by virtue of being a poor, working-class person, she has to make immaculately clean someone else’s household - her labour is not even directed at improving the condition of her own home. This painting is rife with gender and class politics. The upturned bucket, dark background and the little girl leaning on the broom create a sense of tragic melancholy, an overwhelming recognition of the lack of options in the life of this girl.

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**Check Your Progress 2**

1) **Find out the major differences between the male artists and women artists of the Renaissance religious arts, and describe these.**

2) **Name the major artists you have read about in the Renaissance period.**
With the Renaissance we witnessed the deployment of the male body to articulate contemporary politics of the time. In a similar fashion, women’s bodies have been incessantly appropriated for masculine political agendas. The art produced during the French Revolution in the late 18th century marvellously elucidates male recruitment of women’s bodies to express all kinds of political positions.

In France, the political animosity felt towards the King and Queen, Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette, took the form of innumerable semi-pornographic caricatures against the royal body. The sexual escapades, or rather their absence in the king’s life and, in reverse, the abundance of rumours surrounding Queen Marie Antoinette’s heterosexual as well as lesbian dalliances became the subject of proliferating sketches and engravings. Initially, the King’s inability to sexually consummate his marriage evoked much medical interest. Soon, however, the matter came to be seen as a symptom of the corruption and flaccidity in the political state of France. Sexual incapacity was thus re-presented as political impotency and ineptness. If the king did not have the “force to deflower his wife” (Baecque, 1993, P. 43), neither did he have the force or moral authority to head a nation. Secondly, the queen’s cuckolding of the king, one might suggest, offered alluring lessons to the masses: if the queen, sexually dissatisfied with the king, could choose alternative lovers why couldn’t the people, displeased with his politics, do the same - that is, choose better rulers for themselves for instance.

The queen’s successful deception and subversion of the king’s authority was not, however, a subject of celebration in popular culture. On the contrary Marie Antoinette’s power made her the object of immense misogynistic satire and ridicule. Pierre Saint-Amand in a fascinating essay illustrates the long history of what he calls the “Marie Antoinette syndrome” - the fear of powerful women. A woman who could dominate the king himself needed to be restrained in every possible way – through humiliation, decapitation, or, if need be, through both. The queen’s body, so far the source of her power over and against the king, now appears as the very site upon which the revolutionaries will “tame” her (Saint-Amand, 1994, 379-400).

This desacralisation of the royal body culminates in the ultimate ritual of dis-memberment: decapitation. However, as Saint-Amand points out, the guillotining of the king and the queen, respectively, denoted very different parables. If the king’s beheading ushered in a new political regime, the queen’s assassination was more a necessary “moral” act, than a political one. She was punished more for her excesses as a woman of easy virtue, than for her political status as queen. Herbert, a journalist who reported
on the queen’s execution, recounted the “orgasmic bliss” (Saint-Amand, 1994, P. 387) that enveloped the masses on seeing the “feathered tart” receive just punishment. It was precisely for her sexual crimes rather than her political tyranny that she needed to be beheaded. Jacques Louis David’s sketch of Marie Antoinette on her way to the guillotine captures this gendered dimension in her execution. The trappings and markings of the queen - the crown, gown and general opulence and regalia - are entirely absent from her person. If David hadn’t particularised her as the queen there would be little means of recognising her as one. The implication is clear - she need not have been the queen at all. Like Charlotte Corday (murderer of Marat) or Olympe de Gouges (author of the ‘Declaration of Rights of Woman’) - both of whom were also sent to the guillotine - she represents any transgressive woman.

![Fig. 3a.7: David's Oath at the Tennis Court. Source: @chrishorner.net](image)

The politics of body that David’s *Oath at the Tennis Court* portrays stands in sharp emblematic contrast to the feminised Hydra (*Body Politic*). If in the previous plate we saw Hydra being captured in the moment of its destruction - the spears of the people are piercing its breast/heart - David’s *Oath* delineates the moment of birth of a new entity: the People’s Republic. Similarly, if the multiple heads of the Hydra are the corrupt and degenerate aristocrats responsible for destroying France, then the heads taking the oath in David’s painting belong to the righteous democrats. And finally if the Hydra-monster is a feminine creature, the new body politic in the *Oath*, is exclusively and unambiguously male - women are entirely excluded from this grand political spectacle and ritual. The canvas is covered with masculine figures, all embracing one another, and dedicating themselves to their fatherland. However, the feminine shall find no place in the defining and
elevated moments, or when new, liberal politics are being formulated, as the painting reveals. The liberals (as demonstrated in the discussion of David’s painting) visually conceptualised themselves in direct opposition to their enemies. And yet, like so many purportedly ‘democratic’ and ‘progressive’ movements, the French Revolution too dipped into the ever-fertile pool of misogynistic images and narratives to propagate their ‘radical’ agenda. Emancipatory gender politics would have to wait another century (at least) before it could be considered at par with the discourse of class and nation. Interestingly, a paradox lies here — a revolution which organised the new body politic around its male members (once again refer to David’s *Oath*), and which strove strenuously to employ “virile” images to do so, ended up choosing the feminine emblem of Liberty as its most defining symbol of self-representation.

A few examples of the use of the figure of Liberty before one undertakes an analysis of the reasons for this choice: Eugene Delacroix’s painting *Marianne* on *La Liberte* (1793) depicts a young woman in forward motion, connoting the onward movement of the Revolution. The club she carries (like Hercules) suggests that the work of the revolution is not over. In fact this drawing arrests Liberty in the very moment of her work—the destruction of the hydra of despotism trampled beneath her feet. Nonetheless, the harmony and joy that she brings to the people is emblematised in the serene expression of her face, the beauty of her flowing robes and the laurel leaves she carries to honour the revolutionaries. In another anonymous
engraving (1790), Liberty’s posture is even more typically feminised than in the previous drawing. She stands passively with the symbols of the revolution - the liberty cap and the tablets of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Her body is petite and “devoid of muscularity and tension” (Juneja, 1996, 19). Liberty, here, is as feminine as feminine gets.

Why then did the masculinist politics of the revolution choose this figure? One argument offered is that even though the queen epitomised the moral degeneration of France, it was really the king who represented political tyranny. Therefore a feminine figuration of liberty would stand as a perfect antithetical corollary to the patriarchal monarch. Maurice Agulhon adds that familiarity with Catholicism made a Marian figure more accessible to the French. Furthermore, this stable, nurturing, feminine figure stood as a direct counter-point to not just the king but the often unstable and disappointing male revolutionaries (like Lafayette and Mirabeau) themselves. The feminine ideal was seen as uncontaminated by the grimy world of politics (Hunt, 1983, 98-99).

Monica Juneja forwards another interesting reading - the male form, she suggests, escapes universality and anonymity and always functions as a contextualised particular. Women, on the other hand, are seen as embodying a transcendent, abstract quality, as residing “beyond public structures and therefore [able to] lend themselves more easily to the representation of abstract notions” (Juneja, 1996). Moreover, by personifying Liberty in female form, the revolutionaries converted this political value into an object of male acquisition, a reward that all revolutionaries could desire, strive for and possess. The feminisation of Liberty, therefore, is also a transformation of this political notion into a sexualised lure for men to conquer.

In the midst of this frenzied euphoria about youthful brothers-in-arms, where and how did women figure? The 1789 etching by Johann Peters, The New Bastille Square, offers a telling account - even though the mother looms large and is placed in the foreground as compared to the dwarfed king, her role in the Republic is contained within the parameters of the “nurturer” of future soldiers and republicans for the nation. As a matter of fact, one of her sons is already dressed as a soldier. The fetishisation of women as mothers lead to several depictions of women with their breasts exposed. An anonymous engraving Republican Mother Nursing Her Infant (1793) lays down an even more precise role for women - motherhood as such is not enough. They must be a particular kind of mother - one who nurses her own children. This engraving seems to feed into the Rousseauvian paranoia, which Republican France shared, regarding wet-nursing. All good women of the republic, these engraving commands, must nurse their own children.
After the fall of Robespierre, - he had come to be too closely related to “The Terror” - it was this symbol of the nursing mother that the Thermidorians chose as most representative of their ideals - peace, patience and nurture (as opposed to the blood-thirst of the Terror). This, and the even more pacified feminine allegory of Liberty (now depicted as seated rather than standing or marching) helped France emerge out of the shadows of regicide and the months of the guillotine. It is exceedingly ironical that the revolutionaries eventually found it necessary to coalesce around the bodies of women - both at the start and at the end of the revolution. If the body of a woman (the queen) initiated the revolution, as ‘provocation’ so to speak, then the body of another woman (the mother) helped the revolutionaries recover from the horror of the Frankensteinian monster they had unleashed in the form of the Terror. The feminine thus re-enters revolutionary representation - as a pacifying presence.

Among the recent painters, the works of Frieda Kahlo, a Mexican painter, is symptomatic of a female art that is dynamic, original, and an unapologetic celebration of female experience and form. Her self portrait confesses to an unabashed self-confidence - in being a woman painter - and a dramatic revamping of the female nude in male art. There is nothing celestial about the women in Kahlo work. They are real, full bodied, vibrant women, consumed in practices of everyday living or captured in moments of surreal self-introspection. Even when the women in their paintings face the audience outside the painting, the impression created is one of self-reliance and autonomy. These women are not eager to please their (male) audiences. It is their own emotional and mental journey that occupies their attention (Kahlo’s Frieda and the Cesarean Operation, 1932, and Me and My Parrots, 1941). Kahlo’s paintings are also remarkable for their exploration of a non-European aesthetics and their ability to recover and retain an Indian/Mexican aesthetics.

Check Your Progress 3

1) Discuss any two similarities and dissimilarities in the portrayals of femininity in the Western arts.

2) Point out and analyse the major differences between masculine and feminine figurines of the paintings and sculptures of the West.

3) Name and describe the major artists and paintings you have read about in the previous sections.
In all this talk of the way in which gender politics manifest in art we have not addressed the key issue of the gender of the artist. For centuries women were believed to be incapable of imaginative, intellectual “creation” - this was the sphere of men while women’s sphere was of “preservation and nourishment” (Arthur Bye cited in Nemser, 1973, P. 74). Since women’s identities were considered subservient to their “womb-centred nature” (Nemser, 1973, P. 76) critics argued that this influenced women’s choice of subject matter in art. The underlying basis for all these assumptions is that women’s art is a slave to their biology, and is inherently ‘feminine’ - an attribute that is best avoided in art. Unfortunately, ‘feminine’ will retain its pejorative connotations until society as a whole does not rethink and revamp its gender politics.

3.7A GLOSSARY

Post-lapsarian : It refers to the Fall of Man. In Christian religion, the fall of man, or simply the fall, refers to the transition of the first humans from a state of innocent obedience to God to a state of guilty disobedience to God. In Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve live at first with God in a paradise, but the serpent tempts them into eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which God had forbidden them from. After doing so they become ashamed of their nakedness and as a result they were banished from paradise. The Fall is not so-named in the Bible, but the story of disobedience and expulsion is recounted in both Testaments of the Holy Bible in different ways. The fall can refer to the wider theological or religious inferences for all humankind as a consequence of Eve and Adam’s original sin.

Decapitation : It refers to the deployment of the fear of decapitation as a weapon used by men to keep subversive women in control. Women, she argues, can escape being completely subsumed by the symbolic because they “lack”, from the feminist theorist, Hélène Cixous’ ‘Castration and Decapitation’. What for men is a signifier of women’s inferiority, the lack of the penis, becomes for Cixous an empowering absence. However men cannot allow women to have an upper hand in anything, and if they must suffer from castration anxiety, then it becomes necessary to fill women with terror about loss of a body
part too - hence the deployment of the fear of decapitation. All women who ask questions and dare to laugh, or more precisely “laugh at” (and hasn’t Bakhtin already proved the subversive potential of laughter?), thus refusing to listen (respectfully) to the commands of the law of the father - the 180 wives of the Chinese king, the Sphinx and Medusa - must all be dealt with in the same way: off with their heads.

3.8A UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Describe the relationship of post-lapsarian and male nudity in Renaissance religious arts.

2) Discuss the paradigmatic shift of outdoor to indoor in relation to representations of women in paintings during Renaissance period.

3) Compare and contrast the works of Rembrandt and Vermeer from a gender perspective.

4) Explain the ‘Marie Antionette syndrome’ in paintings and sculptures of later centuries in the West.

5) Describe the expressions of liberty in paintings and sculptures, especially in those of Europe.

3.9A REFERENCES

Books


**Images**


3.10A SUGGESTED READINGS


Some Useful Images’ Hyperlinks


Vermeer’s *A Lady Writing a Letter* [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/7d/A_Lady_Writing_by_Johannes_Vermeer,_1665-6.png/250px-A_Lady_Writing_by_Johannes_Vermeer,_1665-6.png](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/7d/A_Lady_Writing_by_Johannes_Vermeer,_1665-6.png/250px-A_Lady_Writing_by_Johannes_Vermeer,_1665-6.png)