

Baroque Women: Pictures of Purity and Debauchery

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Abstract

Throughout the Baroque period, and much of the world's artistic history, women have been portrayed as either saints or sinners, pictures of purity or wicked temptresses. Women have known little middle ground historically, despite occupying diverse roles and representing half the world's population. In Catholic nations, where most art was religious in nature, Baroque women met the dichotomy of being cast as either saint or sinner, mother or virgin. Whether tender images of Mary as a doting mother, saints tending to wounded souls, or virgins pure in body and spirit, the image of a good woman was docile, kind and soft. If not soft and docile, women were depicted as whores, adulteresses and tricksters, wicked temptations to good men. There was little in between for Catholic representation of the woman at this time. In the northern, protestant states however, alternate depictions of women began to emerge in the growing prominence of genre painting. It is here women were attributed with a slightly greater range of characters, perhaps a housewife, young bride, or an elderly matron. While not restrained to mere saint or sinner, women were still chained to their relation to the men around them. Their depicted identities remained flat in the accepted social roles of their gender and were rarely seen outside of a domestic sphere. Whether religious or genre, women were nearly always represented in terms of their value or relation to men. The only freedom from these restrictive roles was when artists turned to mythological themes.

Catholic



Jusepe de Ribera (Spanish, 1591-1652)
The Holy Family with Saints Anne and Catherine of Alexandria
1648
Oil on Canvas

The Virgin and Saints Anne and Catherine surround the infant Christ with a soft feminine energy. Elderly St. Anne (upper left) is hooded, draped in drab fabrics, carrying a fruit basket and a thorny rose. While the fruit might be a matronly symbol of nourishment, she also brings the prickly reminder of child's fate. St. Catherine, in youthful yellow, kneels to kiss the baby Jesus's hand with a gentle hand over her own heart. Despite the bold eye contact, the portrayal of the Virgin Mother is not without the reminder of her feminine chores of sewing and mending, her supplies resting in the corner. Even Mary, one of the most revered and pictured women of all time, is bounded by her roles in relation to men. In her virginity, or lack of intimacy with men, she is pure; in her birthing of her son she is important.

Genre



Johannes Vermeer (Dutch, 1632-1675)
Young Woman with a Water Pitcher
1663
Oil on Canvas

A young woman places one hand on a silver water pitcher as she opens a stained-glass window with the other, either to pour it out or bring light into the room. Her touch is gentle and deliberate. Her expression is docile, faintly smiling as she performs her daily chores. While she is neither saint nor sinner, her role as a housewife is clear. Her purity and chastity are signified by the pearls, which spill softly from her jewelry box, and the covering of her hair. She is the picture of a chaste wife in an idyllic home. As a chaste wife, she is defined by two monikers in reference to her value and relation to the men around her.



Valentin de Boulogne (French, 1591-1632)
Christ and the Adulteress
1618-22
Oil on Canvas

Mobbed by men, a scantily clad woman is presented to Jesus for judgement. The harsh left lighting falls squarely on the "adulteress," eyes cast to the side shamefully, exposed with her chest bare in the act of sin. Interestingly, she is not accompanied with her partner in sin, his reputation and visage remaining anonymous. Looking up from writing in the dirt, Jesus exclaims "He who is without sin...let him cast the first stone." This statement shifts the weight of shame to include the crowd as there is not one among men without sin. If the viewer does not know the story, however, the woman continues to appear a singularly sinning wretch being reprimanded by Jesus.

Mythological



Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577-1640)
Venus in Front of the Mirror
1614/15
Oil on Panel

Cupid holds up a mirror for Venus, who peers through it at the viewer behind her. While quite a sensual image of Venus, who sits naked in the center of the frame, she is neither sinner nor whore. She rests comfortable and strong in her being, exuding sexual energy and confidence in her smug mirrored eye contact. She is aware that the viewer is peering at her naked frame but makes no motions to save her dignity. Furthermore, there is no suggestion of the male gaze or her relation to any man. Her beauty is universal for both man and woman, and is not depicted as a sexual item but a woman in control of her sexuality.