

## Feminine form between symbol and representation

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**Abstract:** *Since the first presence of the human body in art is that of a woman, namely a female nude, I think it might not seem too hazardous to state that art history starts with the image of a woman. Female forms – transformed or exalted – were always present in the art image. For artists and generally speaking also for the society, the woman has represented since the oldest times "the model", or "the ideal of beauty". But as a reaction against the rigid and restrictive standards the feminine beauty ideal had imposed in art and society, the U.S.A. witnessed in the 1960s the rise of the feminist movement, one of the main art movements following the Second World War.*

*This work is about trying to explain why the woman appears rather as a model in art history as an artist, but also about the female artist who defied the rules.*

**KeyWords:** *art, feminine form, Mother Goddess, Feminist art, ideal of beauty*

Since the first presence of the human body in art is that of a woman, namely a female nude, I think it might not seem too hazardous to state that art history starts with the image of a woman.

The opinion of the ancient historian Strabo comes to complete this statement: "All men recognize that women were the founders of religion". Women not only represent the first images in art, but they also are the chief founders of religion. However, Sir James G. Frazer says that men create gods, women worship them. Where does this paradox come from?!...

According to Joseph Campbell's thoughts, this occurs gradually. So, there is a first phase, when the Supreme Mother Goddess exists and creates the world by herself. She has many lovers and children, yet she is the only who has the control and the absolute power. Then there is a second phase, in which she is described and illustrated as having the absolute power, but also a male consort, who might have been her lover, or her son, or her younger brother. First, this male was her subject, yet gradually his power increases as he becomes her husband. During the third phase, the King-Husband-God rules as an equal of the Goddess, yet the scene is prepared for her dethronement. And finally, during the fourth phase, the Man-God is the only one who has the absolute power, remaining together with the defeated Goddess as mother and woman, captive in an unfortunate spiral which mankind not only did not overthrow, but only now is trying to stop.

However, what happened in religion had a direct evident social influence. The first representations of the female body were under the sign of art, but also of the sacred. It is the image of a strong, fertile woman, as proved by numerous figurines found in the whole Europe, with heavy breasts and vaguely represented faces. Such an image is among the first marks of religion on Earth, and its quintessence seems to come from the primordial myths. "Without representing a certain individual, such figurines have the neutral expression of the impersonal, omnipotent live-giving Great Mother."<sup>1</sup>

The Persian goddess Anahita, the Japanese goddess Amaterasu, or the Mesopotamian Tiamat are personifications of Mother Nature, who gives birth to the Universe and man. Thus, a parallelism might be drawn between the image of the primordial Mother Goddess and

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Feininger – The image of woman: women in sculpture from pre-historic times to the present day (with an introduction by Henry Miller).

that of Virgin Mary, the Holly Mother, who makes the supreme sacrifice and puts the good of mankind above the life of her own son.

Her merciful figure as well as her secondary role in the biblical story appears to be in a total contradiction with a range of bloodthirsty goddesses who request human sacrifices and demand man's total submission. Such strange and exotic figures bear the names of the goddesses Kali, Cybele, Sedna or Nerthus. Their "negative" side is very easily felt by the modern Western-European man used to the image of the woman as prototype of the universal mother, a model imposed by the Christian religion. Yet this other side, that might seem so unusual to Christians, does nothing else than counterbalancing the delicate equilibrium between the male principle and the female principle, existent both in society and in religion.

In this respect, the Greek female pantheon is the most "balanced", because its goddesses may easily be assimilated to the modern woman. Here we find the prototype of *the jealous woman* in the figure of Hera, Zeus's wife, of *the sorrowful mother* in the image of Demeter, of the *tomboy* in the temperament of Artemis, of *the wise woman* as personified by Athena or of *the diva* as represented by Aphrodite.

In the same space of the ancient Greece one can feel the dreadful presence of the Amazons. Herodotus, "the Amazons' historian", presents them as "eorpata", which is the Greek word for "husband killers", *kreobóroi*, "meat eaters" (Aeschylus, *The Suppliants*, 287) and *androktones*, "killers of men".

I think that such a presence had the role of creating the illusion of equality in the sphere of the myth, in a society where the woman had strictly the role of mother and submissive wife, having a restricted space in the house and having no right to participate to the social life together with her male partner. Yet since the woman needed a moral support that she could not find in religion any more, it is possible that the widely spread worship of goddesses at the end of the 20th century is the effect of the apparition of the feminist movement, while the increased importance of worshipping Virgin Mary (at least in the Catholic religion) might be the response of the traditional and patriarchal Christian theology.<sup>2</sup>

The subtle mechanism presented by Joseph Campbell, by means of which the female sacred was gradually substituted by the male sacred worked very well in religion and even in the society, yet in art things are visibly different.

Female forms – transformed or exalted – were always present in the art image. Throughout the different ages along history, observing the interconnections in the visible and the invisible world, or between different reigns and natural phenomena, for instance, induced moments of fear into people, but also knowledge (scientists) or reverie (poets and visual artists). Thus, a discussion upon the female form is unimaginable without mentioning a whole related world that people, regardless of era, taste or culture, bring in connection to it. Dissimulated or not, the comparison is to be made between the different forms of the surrounding world (the moon, water, earth, stars, flowers) and the manifestations of the female form.

Already at the beginning of mankind, under the direct influence of religion, the female form always existed in a sphere of magic, where the similarities between it and nature were correctly perceived. Thus, in his work "Pitoresc și melancolie", Andrei Pleșu wrote that, "before being interesting from a visual perspective, nature was – already in the early antiquity – extremely stimulating at the allegorical level. Before being a landscape, it was first of all a character, and always a *female* character."

<sup>2</sup> Encarta Encyclopedia - *Goddess worship*, 2004

From the first earthen pottery shaped by a woman's hand and the figurines of Venus type that remember of the earth component of the first man "shaped" by God to the analogies of modern philosophers and poets, earth always has been regarded as female matter. The moon, very important for the primitive man, too, is of female nature. Alexander Marshak demonstrated that in the upper Palaeolithic there was a symbolic system of calculating time by observing the moon phases. This system last more than 25,000 years and proves that this cycle of the moon was analysed, memorised and used in practical purposes already at the beginning of our civilisation. Perhaps the oldest manifestation form of the relationship between the women and the moon is represented by the – let us call it "organic" – relationship between the two. Those aspects common both to the woman and to the moon have been represented by a subtle paintress of female symbols, Georgia O'Keeffe, in her famous series of works "Pelvis with moon".

Artists and poets always have been the most vigilant observers of the surrounding world and of the similarities between the female forms and the forms of nature. "With her hot caress rounding the coast, the sea conferred it maternal contours and, I would say, the unconditional love of female breast, everything that it seems to the baby to be so sweet: nutrition, warmth and refuge." It's the way Jules Michelet perceives the image of the female breast in the depths of a bay, of a rounded peninsula.

In the millieu of visual arts there are two names that retain our attention, namely the art critic Gilles Neret and his remarks upon the work of Gustav Klimt: "He prefers to depict mostly women than men in his paintings, painting even a whole female universe, a narcissistic world of lesbians loving one another among waves of flowers and waters, with their hair full of marine algae", meaning, of course, his paintings "Watersnakes" I and II, and the work of Aristide Maillol, "The River", in which water is personified by a reclined young woman, whose body suggests the undulatory movement of water waves. The shell, a water product, continues through its form the analogies with the female genitals. Thus, the shell's symbolic image appears in the work "The Altarpiece of Brera" of the painter Piero della Francesca, that was painted between 1472-1474. The cave, the house, the geometrical figures, all of them have symbolic correspondents in the female body.

A crucial moment for modern sculpture is represented by rediscovering primitive art and black art, but also by the significant contribution of Brâncuşi in using the symbolism of abstract forms.

Thus, "Adam and Eve", the divine couple sculpted by Brâncuşi, , "The Ant" of Germaine Richier, Giacometti's "Suspended Ball", Franz Eggenschwiler's "Ovulation Object", Picasso's "Woman in Garden" and "Marie Therese at Boisgeloup", are important art works in which the sculptor presents dissimulated or obsessive female forms.

For artists and generally speaking also for the society, the woman has represented since the oldest times "the model", or "the ideal of beauty". The continuous variation of the idea of female beauty is to a great extent due to cultural differences of various historical moments, yet also to fragrant differences or nuances generated by the ethnic zone. Major differences of various historical moments are generated by long periods of time during which the taste for beauty and for the female form have found constant expressions. Thus, the ideal of beauty in the primitive period is clearly different from the ancient purity and sincerity, which on its part differs from the periods marked by religious excess and hypocrisy as well as from ascetics, romanticism or libertinage.

The case of the artist Orlan is more that a confirmation of this, and the artist also wants to reveal to us the purpose of this suffering. Finally, the woman has to realise that achieving that "ideal of beauty" is impossible and even undesirable for the very reason that reaching this goal means giving up her own "self", her own identity. On the other hand,

throughout history, beyond the bizarre and excess of one culture or another, beyond personal subjectivity, we are able to define for certain periods a certain fixed ideal of beauty that was maintained and adopted by the artists of that time.

At the same time it is important to mention the two dimensions that are the basis of this ideal of beauty: the anthropological dimension, in which sexual attraction as the motor of species perpetuation, and motherhood as its result, are the main characteristics, and the aesthetic dimension, which contains the reference points for these ideals, as well as certain relationships between parts and dimensions always perceived as "beautiful", no matter whether in Africa, Asia or Europe.

From the poetry of female forms in the ancient Egypt we thus reach the spiritual and moral dimension of beauty in the ancient Greece, where harmony and order are the principles considered by philosophers to be the basis of beauty.

With regard to the woman in the middle ages, Umberto Eco has a very interesting remark, namely that during the "dark ages", as we use to call this period, there develops an aesthetics of colour and light evincing richness and exuberance as never before. During this period, the female beauty is compared with that of gems, which, through their colour and shininess resembles the perfect beauty of the world. During the Renaissance, the social importance of the woman increases and subsequently the dimensions and sumptuousness of her clothes, her silhouette tending to become a sphere, a perfect form, as stated by Adina Nanu.

On the other hand, the 16th and 17th centuries propose a new type of female beauty. There is a passage from the sensual beauty as depicted by the artists of the Renaissance to another image of femininity: "the educating, administrating housewife", and the "model" is that depicted by Rubens. During the following artistic movements, Mannerism and baroque, "grace appears as the new expression of beauty and presupposes a philosophy of agitated human nature, in which harmony is accompanied by incertitude". The decay of female beauty starts from the 18th century and continues throughout Romanticism, a period in which the morbid accompanies the female image in arts. A brighter aesthetics appears to be in the 19th century, in which "Isadora Duncan, the queen of dance, with her undulated motion, wrapped in veils of a pale green, seeming to embody the impressive Gothic beauties of the Pre-Raphaelites, is a real icon of her age", as Umberto Eco remarks. Finally, the 20th century aesthetics imposes to the modern woman a chameleonic look, yet at the same time a new obsession: the filiform silhouette.

As I have mentioned before, the first presence of the human character on the scene of artistic representation is that of a nude body. And the most important aspect is that the first nude character is a female one, announcing a long series of nude *Venuses*, reiterated, as a studio theme, during all the following periods. Of course there were also periods of discontinuity in this series, yet those were exceptions, and such exceptions had social and political, yet not aesthetic causes, because, more or less nude, the human body has always impressed the artist looking for beauty and perfection.

As the body present in visual arts has been either pagan or sensual, throughout history there are periods during which the nude body either develops plenary or is limited by religious restrictions. The concept of dissociation or association of body and soul is even the motor that starts an aesthetics that either is favourable or not favourable to the nude body. A complex imagistic world is determined by discontinuity of social philosophy upon the human

body. The difference of conception cannot be better illustrated than by the example of Brâncuși and his teacher, Rodin. The former loves the poetry of the human body, the latter looks for the idea behind the flesh. The sculptor loudly disapproves the flesh, considering the "flesh" of sculptures "beefsteaks".

Yet, as the painter Tonitza was wondering in one of his writings: "May the nude body – painted or sculpted in marble – be regarded as something unmoral? Certainly not, as the naked truth is also not something unmoral". The ancient artists seem to share the same opinion, meaning that the beautiful body had to be naked and admired like an art work.

Going backwards, from the perfection of the Greek art to its Roman copies to the Byzantine art that denies any connection between art and the human body, the female nude knows an aesthetic, but at the same time also a social involution. The progressive way in which sculpture evolved from the interdiction of any human image during the iconoclastic period and towards the Byzantine art, which represented the human body mostly as a cover of the soul, to the Roman art, in the framework of which the human body is represented shorter or longer, function of the place it was to be put in, shows that the disappearance of the nude body did not occur suddenly, but gradually, the religious phenomenon and the Christian prudishness determining this discontinuity in the presentation of the team.

That is why the first (re-)appearance of the female nude in Gothic sculpture is in connection with the allegorical theme of vanities (*Vanitas*), that opposes, in the same sculpture, a nude of a young woman standing back-to-back with that of an old woman. This theme wants to present the ephemeral nature of human life and equality of all people in front of death. During the Renaissance, after rediscovery of the classic antiquity, starting with the 13th century, in Italy the nude became once more a respectable and important theme for artists of that period.

Modern sculpture developed plastique and re-(discovery) of the fragment. For instance, Rodin, one of the most important sculptors of the world, uses female breast and, giving up the rest of the body, surprises the beauty of the detail from the whole. The nude acts of Antoine Bourdelle or Aristide Maillol remember of the plenitude and perfection reached by the nude during the Renaissance period, yet with modern methods.

A discussion upon the female nude would not be complete without a series of remarks upon the human body construction, anthropometry and anthropology. The passage from the Egyptian canon to the Greek one has a lot to win, namely through a more detailed look upon anatomical law.

With regard to the harmony of the parts to the whole of the human body, Mihai Mănescu retains the following idea: "A painted arm shall be pleasant especially when it evinces credibility of its carnal and colour attributes regarding its look, and at the same time credibility as a member in the whole of the body". Good knowledge of the parts of the human body and of the reference points determined by precise anatomic knowledge shall help the artist in his attempt of creating a harmonious body or a bold movement... However, it cannot be omitted that, "both morphological and geometrical deformations are highly determined by a given historical frame, by aesthetic tyranny, exponents of a personalised art school, so that, as I have already mentioned previously, a Boticellian nude could not have been imagined outside of the aesthetic norms of his age, and a Rubensian nude could not have been admitted in the same age".<sup>3</sup>

Against the fixed norms, considered to be obsolete and restrictive, were also the Feminist artists, who wanted to elaborate new canons, made by women for women. Feminist art, does not define a certain particular style, but a consequent aspiration to assure the woman their well-deserved place in the contemporary world, and especially in the world of art, which

<sup>3</sup> Mihai Mănescu, *Arta învățării artei*, Ed. Eikon, 2008, p. 281

is regarded by Feminists to be constructed on principles that are favourable to men.<sup>4</sup> Feminist art tries to eliminate the discrepancy between the creative potential of the woman and the minor tasks currently attributed to her by the society.

In the album of the exhibition that took place in 1966, "*Art and Feminist Revolution*", containing almost 300 works, one can see the themes according to which the exhibited works were arranged and implicitly the artists' main directions of approach: *abstract art* (conceptualism), *body as raw material* (the woman as anonym object of a male subject's desire), *family stories* (kitchen semiotics), *sex as a show* (practices that lead to stigmatisation of women) or *knowledge as power* (self-representation in own terms of sexuality, especially with regard to what used to be invisible, blocked, forbidden or invalidated)".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Grigorescu, Dan, *Dicționarul Avangardelor*, Ed. Enciclopedică, 2003, p. 229

<sup>5</sup> Nicolae, Cosana, *Feminism în pielea goală?*, articol din „Dilema Veche”, nr. 185, 27 august 2007