"Her Beauty Captivated his mind and the sword severed his neck!":

The Changing Depiction of Judith Beheading Holofernes from the Pre-Renaissance Era to Contemporary Society

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"The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."
— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In any famous art institution, we normally see images primarily celebrating the lives of men, based on their accomplishments in any field such as conquest in war, creativity or intellect. Even though portraits of women, such as wives of the elite classes of Western nations, the Virgin Mary, and mythological Venuses, are displayed in these art institutions, these female figures are depicted as delicate creatures whose fair, smooth skin mimic marble statues. This differs from the heroic caricature of the legendary men who are depicted with strong stances and surrounded by allusions or symbols that refer to their accomplishments as human beings. The difference between how women and men are depicted in art reflects how women have been viewed for centuries as lesser than men. Rather than viewing women

as people who can equally achieve the same goals and foster the same thoughts as their male counterparts, society has regarded women as containing handicaps for achieving ambitions because of their biological make-up.

Not only can this relationship between the sexes be seen from portraiture but also from the depiction of popular stories from the Bible, mythology, and history. This study examines artistic depictions of the story of Judith beheading Holofernes in the Book of Judith from different historical eras. The goal of these case studies is to bring attention to how art has reflected ideas about women in the past using sexist stereotypes. This article treats these ideas and the production of artwork as historically contingent in order to question the misogyny displayed through the history of art. Using historical research and stylistic analysis, this article will argue that Judith was portrayed differently during each era in response to how women were viewed at the time.

Feminism in Art History

The history of Western art has structured the way in which artists were trained and what was considered "good or acceptable art." During the Renaissance, philosophers and artists referred back to classical ideals. They also embraced humanism as well as the dominance of the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in the 17th century. This encouraged artists to create works of art that were reflective of the artistic skills of illusionism. They also emphasized the depictions of historical, biblical, and mythological events or stories to convey the values of the time, most of which were nationalistic. When studying artistic eras or works of art that are significant to human culture and are recognizable to most observers, one tends to notice the rarity of women artists despite the inclusion of female figures in portraiture or sculpture. This state of affairs was criticized and discussed during the Second Wave of Feminism during the 1960s and 1970s, after centuries of normative tendencies from a male-dominated artistic field.

Before discussing the importance of this movement and what it has contributed to Art History, it is vital to understand what 'feminism' means to society. Feminism specifically refers to the equality of women with men and the Feminist movement's struggle to achieve this equality.[1] At the root of any advocacy for feminist movements is the idea of seeking respect and dignity between the sexes, however there are also different mindsets in regards to what methods should be used to achieve this equality. The different approaches on how to achieve

[1] Richard T. Schaefer, *Sociology Matters* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013), 18.

this equality are reflected in how female art historians and artists utilize feminism in their critique of art history and in their approaches to art.

For art historian Linda Nochlin, pointing out the misogyny in art history was a way to shed light on the importance of gender equality. In 1972 she published "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" which was a question that exposed overlooked sexism in the history of art.[2] She offered several answers to the question that she posed. First, women were excluded from the higher levels of artistic training as they were unable to have access to artistic methods that were needed to create historical paintings, such as nude figures. This is because women were not allowed to attend classes with live nude models, forcing them to only be able to participate in the lower level of painting, such as still-life. This constructed certain forms of art as prestigious and reserved them for men. This meant that art created by men was more important than the art created by women. The artificiality of the enforced hierarchy of genre reinforced the belief that women artists were unable to be as great as the men who were able to paint grand historical paintings that required a specific artistic skill set.

This belief, Nochlin argues, underlies a greater sexist notion that women were expected to not let art affect their ability to be a housewife or mother. Although there have been successful female artists in the past, Nochlin points out that behind these female artists are connections to a male figure that gave them the resources and ability to practice art in more ways than others. In general, the overall argument that made her article so significant to the feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s is that women artists were not able to have a great placement in art history due to their lack of equal opportunity in tailoring their artistic ability and access to resources, not due to inherent female characteristics or sex.[3]

Nochlin's article reflects the tendency during the 1970s not only to question the past but also to seek a restructuring of the present in order for women and female artists to practice their art without restriction. Feminists in the arts strived to comment on patriarchy in two major ways. Some feminists strived to identify the essence of women, whether through biological or domestic imagery through the idea of "essentialism."[4] They believed that femininity is biologically determined and that embracing the "feminine" and female biology

[2] Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 147-158.

[3] Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 145-73.

[4] Hatt and Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, 145-73.

differentiates women's art from that of males. In doing so, women artists decided to embrace "central core" imagery that refers to female genitalia as well as to choose to work in arts that were deemed 'women's work' such as textiles or quilting. For this type of feminist, highlighting the biology of women and its essence balances the inequality of the sexes. Years later, feminists began to oppose this belief as social activists began to argue that gender is a social construct and not inherently tied to biological essentialism. In this belief, society and its institutions shape the characteristics deemed appropriate for each gender. Both approaches to dealing with feminism and the art world discern the difference between males and females but in different ways through either biology or societal construction.[5]

Overall women are taught to conduct themselves in a certain manner that is based on the expectations of those with the most influence in society, who are primarily men. This can also be seen in the idea of the 'male gaze,' which refers to the way in which women perceive themselves and how they are represented in mediums such as billboards or portraiture based on sexual objectification and societal expectations for women.[6] The approaches of feminism, such as critiquing the patriarchal tendency to exclude women and the notion of 'male gaze,' contribute to the study of women and how they were perceived in society during different historical eras, as the depiction of women relied on male-determined societal standards. From the 1990s to the present, the reaction to the revelations made during the 1960s and 1970s shaped contemporary discussion of what it means to be a feminist and how history has shaped current conditions for women.[7]

The Story of Judith

One way to study a society's perception of women is through the lens of a particular story. The story of Judith beheading Holofernes provides a framework for studying the perception of women during different historical eras. In order to understand how this framework works, it is important to dissect what occurs during this particular story of Judith.

The Book of Judith is a deuterocanonical text excluded from the Hebrew version of the Bible since it was seen as allegorical rather than historical.[8] The story begins in the Israelite town of Bethulia, which is under the control of General Holofernes, an Assyrian who

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[5] Hatt and Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, 145-73.

[6] Hatt and Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, 145-73.

[7] Hatt and Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to its Methods*, 145-73

[8] Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 280.

is attempting to seize lands surrounding Jerusalem. At the Assyrian camp, Judith, a Jewish widow, tells the guards that she wants to help Holofernes and states: "I am on my way to see Holofernes the commander of your army, to give him a true report; I will show him a way by which he can go and capture all the hill country without losing one of his men, captured or slain."[9] Her beauty overwhelmed the guards of the camp who allowed her and her maid Abra inside. Once in contact with Holofernes, Judith informs him that her people "cannot be defeated unless they sin against their God...But...they are at the point of committing the fateful sin, for in their desperation, they are about to consume the food and wine that had been consecrated for the priests. Accordingly, Judith counsels Holofernes to sustain the siege."[10] Several days after entering the camp, Holofernes invites Judith to his tent for a feast. Her maid helps her to get ready in her finest clothing and they visit his tent. Holofernes drinks a large amount of wine and begins to sexually long for Judith but eventually falls asleep. As Abra stands outside Holofernes' bedchamber, Judith takes his sword and cuts off his head. Judith and Abra exit the camp and return to their town. At Bethulia, she presents to her people Holofernes' head, enabling them to defeat the shocked Assyrians.[11] They declared in a song of praise that "her beauty captivated his mind, and the sword severed his neck!"[12]

The heroic story of Judith slaying Holofernes to save her people provides artists with a substantial basis for composing a compelling narrative. But why this particular story? There are thousands of heroic epics such as the Odyssey or Biblical figures such as David or Moses whose themes could produce a great painting and works of art were made to depict those stories. Countless stories describe famous instances of men sacrificing or putting their lives at risk for their nation, which makes them usual. A story of a female conducting the same feat is unusual, providing a different avenue for artists to explore. Although the selection of a female-centered story is distinctive, it does not prevent the tendency to base the depiction on sexist stereotypes of the time.

The gender stereotypes are influenced by sexist beliefs, which leads to reductive characterizations of women. This can be seen in the depiction of another Biblical woman. The Virgin Mary is represented as a pure and delicate virgin and mother. The importance of avoiding any sign of sexuality when portraying the Virgin Mary, a figure whose

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[9] Judith 10:13 NRSV.

[10] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art*, 281; Judith 11:5-19 NRSV.

[11] Judith. 13:15 – 14:19 NRSV.

[12] Judith 16:9 NRSV.

story depends heavily on her dual virginity and motherhood, reflects the association of sex with sin and the importance of overcoming sexual desire through abstinence and virtue.[13] The compulsion to categorize women, rather than fully presenting their complex personalities, demonstrates the sexist inclination to impose traits on women, which in turn helps to sustain male dominance in society.

The artist's interpretation determines the way in which the figures in the story are characterized. For Judith, this can mean her heroic act can be downplayed by being depicted in ways other than courageous, or based on what is appropriate for women at the time. To communicate the intended message, an artist must decide which moment of the story to depict. An artist can choose to depict moments leading up to Judith's kill, the actual moment, or the aftermath. Judith's story can easily turn into an example of a woman defying gender stereotypes in a negative way. The belief that women are deceptive in nature, which will be explored in the next section, is seen in the renderings of Judith that undermined her heroic act. At times, an artist can pick a certain situation from the story and come up with a personal interpretation that can deviate from the nominal message of the story. In all of these artistic decisions, societal expectations for women of the time shaped the depiction, even if it resulted in continuing stereotypes of commenting on women's place in society.

Pre-Renaissance and Renaissance

To provide context for the discussion of the Renaissance, it is important to understand the way in which women were viewed in the years prior to the fourteenth century. The view of women towards the end of the Middle Ages provides a source of comparison and contrast for other historical eras. Women during this time were expected to be either sinless and pure, like the Virgin Mary, or immoral and sexually promiscuous like Eve. Women were not considered to be complex beings and therefore were subject to stereotypes that flattened their complexities. Those who did not act in a way that fit into stereotypes were criticized and socially castigated. In order for people to understand how a woman did not fit the standards of this time, they would sometimes make up supernatural justifications for the woman's behavior. This was the case for women in the thirteenth century, when the search for witches by the Catholic Church became prevalent.[14] Witches were women who acted strangely or did not fit the stereotypes of the day.

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[13] Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

[14] Heinrich Kramer, Excert from *Malleus Maleficarum*, (1486), in *The Witchcraft Source-book*, ed. Brian P. Levack (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 57.

The search for witchcraft is highlighted in the text of the *Malleus maleficarum* ('Hammer of Witches') written by Heinrich Kramer, a Dominican theologian and inquisitor, in 1486. The 'Hammer of Witches' is a vital text that demonstrates the way in which women were viewed during this time. It claims that witches were feeble, sexual, and impressionable women. Describing women as unintelligent and deviously sexual shows that women were typically regarded as simple-minded and that their sexuality should be exclusively procreative.[15] Women were seen as easily susceptible to any outside influences, such as the handiwork of the Devil. These influences, it was believed, shaped women's perceptions since they were unintelligent and could fall into destructive behavior towards men.[16] This is important to remember when examining the depictions of Judith during this time period.

The patriarchal view of women continued in the fourteenth century, although theologians and philosophers also introduced new developments. Scholars at this time debunked previous notions of women, such as the belief that females were the result of an unfinished process in the Creation of Man. However, the patriarchal tradition of securing men's superiority over women continued.[17] The need for male dominance in society led to a paradox discussed by Renaissance theologians. This paradox lies in women's ability to be strong in their weakness, which is seen in the story of Judith. Scholastic thought also continued to associate women's sexuality and beauty with sin. Despite the slight change in the realization of a woman's value since Medieval thinking, the preconception of the interiority of women in society did not falter.[18]

Renaissance artists developed a new style of art that not only served narrative purposes but also demonstrated the artist's ability to create an illusion of the real world on a canvas. This was achieved using the Classical ideals of rationality, order, and realistic figures. One of the most prominent artists of this era is Florentine artist Sandro Botticelli who depicted Judith in his painting "The Return of Judith to Bethulia" in 1470-2. In this painting, Judith is with her maid Abra, who is carrying the head of Holofernes, as they are walking back to Bethulia. Their figures, which are in close proximity to each other,

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[15] Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, (1486), in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. Brian P. Levack, 60.

[16] Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, (1486), in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. Brian P. Levack, 62-63.

[17] Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: a Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 2-27.

[18] Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: a Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life*, 2-27.

are the primary focus of the painting. Judith's shoulders incline towards her maid, giving the appearance that they are about to enter into conversation or are listening intently to what was previously discussed. Judith's facial expression is modest as her eyes are not fixed on anything in particular and her face lacks any sign of joy. Abra appears to be keenly focused on Judith since her facial expression communicates worry and concentration. Botticelli chooses not to depict the triumphant climax of Judith's story and instead decides to reinterpret the Biblical story to fit his imagining of event.

Like women during the Renaissance, Judith's female character was restricted. Botticelli's Judith does not emphasize or convey any notion that a violent act occurred before the depicted scene. Although it was understood that her story is heroic, her accomplishment in this particular painting is not conveyed by a great sense of victory or courage. Her image to viewers is not that of committing a shocking act and its repercussions on the human psyche, but of a dreamy and subtle expression. Although her story was unconventional for a woman, rather than celebrating this fact, Botticelli decided to conform to conventions of depicting female characters.

Italian Baroque

Beyond the cultural flourishing of the Renaissance, the status of women in the seventeenth century is slightly different but generally the same. Chastity was treated as sacred but premarital sex was sometimes also considered as part of the courtship process.[19] While women from previous centuries were shamed for not maintaining their virginity until marriage, women during the seventeenth century would not lose as much of their value to prospective husbands. Even non-consensual intercourse was seen as a continuation of their courtship. At the center of this view of sexuality is a sustained focus on a women's sexuality as her main feature.[20] This is reflected in the artistic career of Italian female painter Artemisia Gentileschi.

Unlike the other artists discussed in this paper, Artemisia Gentileschi was a woman painter. Born and trained in Rome, Gentileschi worked in the popular style of her time, which was characterized as dramatic and heavily emotional in composition and brushstroke.[21] Gentileschi's successful career as a female artist during a time when the upper echelons of the art world were closed to women made her an important figure in feminist art history. However, there are several

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[19] Elizabeth S. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000): 47-75.

[20] Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," 47-75.

[21] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art*, 323.

important things to remember when discussing the work of an artist like Gentileschi. While it is significant to set Gentileschi apart for her accomplishments as a female artist of her time, she should not be critiqued separately from her male counterparts based solely on her gender. Also, despite her frequent treatments of female heroines and sexual themes, it is vital to not focus on Gentileschi's sexuality as the only driving force for her art. As previously mentioned, even though woman's sexual desire was regarded more liberally in Gentileschi's time, the tendency to view sexuality as a prominent feature of a woman remained. In general, Gentileschi should be regarded as a proficient artist who happened to be female and who utilized her own experiences of sexuality. Her art should not be interpreted only through the lens of her biography.

Gentileschi's most famous work is *Judith Slaying Holofernes,* of which she painted two versions from 1614 to 1620 This paper will focus on the second version, which is at the Uffizi in Florence, Italy. In this version, Judith is in the process of beheading Holofernes, while her maid Abra is holding his arms that are thrashing around due to the agonizing pain. The blood squirting from his head is exceptionally graphic and the dramatic light leads the viewers gaze to his head and Judith's figure. Judith's face is determined and her figure is in an active, assertive motion. The dark background brings forth all of the figures which heighten the dramatic action of the painting.[22] The decision to pick this specific moment illustrates Gentileschi's intention for this work. Gentileschi decides to dramatically show the moment Judith is slaying Holofernes.

Gentileschi's depiction is inspired by the work *Judith Beheading Holofernes* by Italian painter Michelangelo Caravaggio. However, Caravaggio's Judith is tentative as she does not hold the sword straight down in a violent motion. She has a worried facial expression and is not completing the action with the same conviction as Gentileschi's Judith, who is relishing the moment. Gentileschi's Judith pushes Holofernes' head down towards her to accomplish the beheading and has a determined look in her face. In Caravaggio's work Abra is not helping Judith and stands to the side of the composition, but in Gentileschi's paintings Abra is holding Holofernes down.

Gentileschi's depiction shows the male as the victim and the female as the triumphant hero. Her Judith defies sexist stereotypes and also appears threatening, a trait that was not usually attributed to valiant women. Although her bosom is seen in the work, it is neither completely covered nor on display which makes her figure less sexualized. Where sexuality becomes the focal point is in the artist's

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[22] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art*, 321-323.

decision to depict this story and the particular moment.

During this time, the Catholic Church encouraged religious imagery in art as a response to the Reformation. In *Judith Slaying Holofernes,* Judith is not connected with the Virgin Mary like previous depictions since Gentileschi did not want Judith to be a passive figure. This is different from the Biblical images painted by her contemporaries who strived for viewers to feel emotion and reflect upon the portrayed stories. Although her work is inspired by Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* in artistic style, Gentileschi does not depict Judith as a delicate figure like Caravaggio's. Caravaggio's work fails to present Judith as a hero of her people who restrains the dark masculine side of Holofernes.[23] While other painters followed the mission of the Church, Gentileschi moved away from it and attempted to evoke emotion in a different way.

Gentileschi's approach to this painting can become overshadowed by the events that happened in her real life. The story of Judith as a woman successfully luring Holofernes, who sexually desired her, to his death is often paralleled with Gentileschi's experience with rape.[24] However, some art historians like Elizabeth Cohen believe that people should not interpret Gentileschi's decision to paint the moment Judith is killing Holofernes as the result of being raped in her own life. This is because it implies that her rape is the driving force for her art work, placing her sexuality as the main characteristic of her personality, and sexualizing her artistic career. This takes away from her artistic achievements and alienates her from the rest of her field.[25]

In the accounts of her rape trial, Gentileschi is characterized as active and energetic and not passive and anxious.[26] Despite the strife of her situation, she defended herself and her reputation. She represented the bold and assertive women in her society who embraced their sexuality. However, even through Gentileschi's artistic depiction of Judith moves away from previous portrayals, sexist ideals still remained and appeared in art of the period. This is seen in the work of another Italian Baroque painter, Massimo Stanzione, titled *Judith with the Head of Holofernes.* In Stanzione's work, Judith is pictured with a clean, bloodless head of Holofernes inside of a satchel that her maid is holding. Judith's eyes are looking towards heaven which reflects the religious intention of the work and her facial expression is somewhat nonchalant. Stazione depicts the aftermath of the killing rather than

[23] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The image of the female hero in Italian Baroque art*, 290-291.

[24] Cohen, *The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History, 47-75.*

[25] Cohen, *The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History, 47-75.*

[26] Cohen, *The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History, 47-75.*

the act itself and is less dramatic. Stazione's Judith exhibits the passive figure Gentileschi was attempting to avoid in her work. These two paintings indicate the reality of the time as women like Gentileschi were pushing women's role in society and the arts forward while contending with traditional notions of women and gender.

Art Noveau and Vienna Secession Movement

The birth of Modernism and a revolution in the understanding of the human psyche shaped the turn of the 20th century. This period saw reactions against the ethics of previous centuries, especially regarding the purpose of art and the concept of gender. Art began to move against the criteria set by the Royal French Academy of Painting and Sculpture, which favored rationality and order in style, developed a hierarchy of genre, and shaped what was considered "good" art through Salons and public opinion. Some artists with more radical ideas moved away from the idea of art as being an illusion of reality and grappled with the notion of art as paint on a canvas. Artists of the Viennese Secession Movement rejected the historical approach to painting that the Royal French Academy of Painting and Sculpture championed.

With this new concept of art came new ideas from neurologist Sigmund Freud. Freud argued that the human psyche contained a conscious and unconscious mind. The unconscious mind was understood to contain repressed thoughts, memories, and dreams.[27] This influenced the art world as it brought forth a different understanding of reality and acknowledged art as a vessel for artists to communicate deep levels of their mind. These developments, as well as the transformation of society from an agrarian to industrial civilization, informed the way in which people approached their lives.

In this transformative time, patriarchal attitudes remained. While the men in this changing society were at the front of revolutionary movements, women were left behind and regarded as threatening to their agenda.[28] These movements brought radical possibilities for certain men while women were not given the same opportunities. Women in this period were able to participate in certain male dominated jobs but they were seen as rivals. Women also fought for voting rights and criticized the patriarchy for not allowing them to be seen as equals. Women, especially in the class-driven society of Vienna, Austria, were seen as "sweet young things," "poor creatures"

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[27] Catherine Dean, *Klimt* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 5.

[28] Tobias Natter, Gerbert G,Frodl, and Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, *Klimt's Women* (New Haven: DuMont, 2000), 14-17.

or "worthless females."[29] These perceptions were connected to the idea that a women's purpose in life was to marry well not for herself, but for her family's societal status.[30] A woman's sexuality was at the center of her worth and she was not allowed to be alone in social gatherings. If a female were to make a mistake, such as having an affair or seducing men, she was seen as a whore. In retaliation, women began to embrace eroticism and their freedom to express their sexuality as they please, whether they decided to be chaste or sexually active. This shows the emerging idea of the "modern woman" which would develop further in the following centuries. However, men viewed these "modern women" as a threat which influenced their erotic characterization in art.[31]

Viennese artist Gustav Klimt embraced this view of female eroticism in his art work. His artistic catalog consists of portraits of women who were either his models or members of the Viennese upper class. He embraced the contemporary ideas of art to depict women two-dimensionally and as references of nature.[32] Klimt refers to his psyche to communicate the idea of his art rather than solely focusing on historical source material. Klimt achieves this in his work *Judith I* which was painted in 1901. Unlike previous art works depicting the story of Judith, Klimt models Judith after a contemporary, social elite Viennese woman named Adele Bloch-Bauer. In this painting, Judith's facial expression is sensual as her mouth is half-open and her gaze is erotic due to her half-closed eyelids and the tilt of her head. Klimt's Judith takes pleasure in holding the head of Holofernes which is different from the pious Biblical Judith. She is wearing an ornate garment that reveals parts of her torso and breasts, strikingly unlike previous depictions of Judith as maiden-like and less sexual. There is no religious imagery besides the Biblical source of the story and the primary focus of the work is to show Judith as a sensual figure who is comfortable with her sexuality.

Klimt objectifies women in his work. Even though he departs from the habit of showing women as idealized Venuses, feeble creatures, or prostitutes. Klimt reflects the way in which women were treated in his society since he relied on them for his artistic success. In his depiction of females like Judith, the ornamentation and sensual forms of his work camouflage the true character of his subject. As he celebrates the freedom of female eroticism, he still reduces women to their sexuality. His eager female models are left behind in the praise of his artistry. Klimt's traditional tendencies in this regard contradict his achievement in leading a group of artists called the Viennese Secession who revolted against the

[29] Natter, Frodl, and Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, *Klimt's Women*, 29-30.

[30] Natter, Frodl, and Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, *Klimt's Women*, 29-30.

[31] Natter, Frodl, and Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, *Klimt's Women*, 36-37.

[32] Natter, Frodl, and Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, *Klimt's Women*, 26-27.

artistic norms of their culture. He mirrors the modern male members of his society who accepted certain changes but did not want to solve issues like women's rights.[33] Women were seen as a threat to men's control because of the ownership of their sexuality. Klimt showed female sexuality in his work not for the benefit of women but for the male gaze and sensual fantasy.

Contemporary Art

From the 1960s to present day, postmodernism has driven the issues surrounding contemporary art. Postmodernism reacted against the criteria set by Modernism, such as the rejection of illusionism and the focus on artistic process. The need for an avant-garde style of art to dominate ended and pluralism in medium and subject matter was embraced. Pluralistic art strives to reflect society's globalism by depicting different cultures in various mediums, including the cultures of previously ignored groups like African Americans and Chicanos.

As this paper has explored, for centuries women have been treated as lesser in society. However, female minorities are further marginalized because of racism and are seldom represented in art. It is easy for feminists and art institutions to seek gender equality while excluding the conditions of women of color.[34] At the same time, the contemporary notions of gender are shaped by institutions and society. The experience of women of color, the new ideas surrounding gender, and the constant development of "what is art?" forms the way in which today's artists, female or male, create art work. People today are seen as contingent beings who are influenced by their environment.[35] The role of perception is brought forth as artists strive to make viewers question their own life experience and their perception of others. By calling into question the role of perception, people can think about the conditions of society, such as the lack of representation of women, specifically of minorities.

African American artist Kehinde Wiley explores these themes in his work by creating monumental portraits of African American people whose poses reference previous paintings in art history. Wiley critiques the Western tradition of portraiture for its tendency to represent individuals of higher social status. He works primarily with oil on canvas and in doing so he draws attention to the traditional practice of portrait painting and provides a contrast between his work and what has been done before. By using poses

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[33] Natter, Frodl, and Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, *Klimt's Women*,14-17.

[34] Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 316-354.

[35] Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 378-422.

from previous paintings, he forces viewers to reconsider the Western artistic convention of depicting male subjects as superior. Not only is he depicting a figure based on his own perception through an investigation of culture, real-life experience, and study of art history, he is also asking viewers to bring into discussion the role of their own perception in shaping the way in which they view the work. He comments on the absence of people of color in art galleries and disproves the notion that Caucasian and African American people exist in different realms of reality.[36]

Wiley's examination of race, culture, and art come to fruition in his work *Judith and Holofernes* (2012). His depiction of Judith is vastly different than those previously discussed. In this work, Judith is represented as an African American female who is holding the head of Holofernes. Judith's body is twisted in an active pose and her gaze, mouth, and jaw are firm. She is wearing a contemporary dress and is set against a floral background, which fights for the viewer's attention and causes tension. Judith as an African American woman deviates from other depictions and comments on the racial inequality of the art world and society. This is because of the rarity of viewing this specific depiction of Judith. Wiley is affirming the identity of women of color while calling into question the racism in Art History. *Judith and Holofernes* creates a perplexing experience that makes the viewer uncomfortable, bringing attention to how the figure is depicted and the viewer's own perception.

Conclusion

Contemporary artists and art historians who focus on gender issues contribute to the dialogue on contemporary notions of gender and patterns of inequality. Examining how gender is understood by society through art allows for the societal expectations of each gender to be contested. It is critical to constantly analyze how women like Judith are being depicted in art. By doing so, the status of women in society is revealed, which provides a means of self-scrutiny. The status of women has changed since the Renaissance as women are less likely to be seen as helpless muses and completely reliant on men. Many depictions of Judith have devalued women by focusing exclusively on her sexuality, whether that is by emphasizing her chastity and emotionless reaction to the killing of Holofernes or by emphasizing her erotic pleasure at his death.

Art has the potential to change the conversation about the current state of gender relations and race relations. Expression of traditional stories like Judith's in a new way can help to point out that there are

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[36] Kehinde Wiley and Thelma Golden. *Kehinde Wiley,* (New York: Rizzoli, 2012), 21.

many different perspectives on her story. Using something familiar can also allow artists to question and denormalize stereotypes about women or about different cultures. Allowing for pluralism of ideas and gender expressions can help people move past two-dimensional ways of approaching conflicts. Nonetheless, traditional stereotypes of women exist and it is a mission for artists today to continue to comment on sexism and react against the misogyny of the art world.

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