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The Sleeping Beauty: *Venus and Cupid* by Artemisia Gentileschi and the Spectacle of a Goddes at Rest

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Abstract

This research explores the transformation of the depiction of feminine divinity in Western art, focusing on the shift from powerful mythological goddesses to passive, objectified female figures under the male gaze during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Through the analysis of works by male artists, the research examines how the motif of the sleeping goddess reflects the growing influence of patriarchy in early modern Europe. The analysis then shifts to Artemisia Gentileschi's *Venus and Cupid*, which challenges these conventional representations by presenting Venus as a serene, empowered figure, free from the constraints of male spectatorship. Comparing Gentileschi's work to that of her male counterparts highlights the differences in how male and female artists presented their subjects, down to the smallest details. Gentileschi's interpretation of a sleeping Venus reclaims the image of the divine feminine, providing a more empowering understanding of women and their roles in both art and spirituality. Through a feminist lens, this research argues that Gentileschi's work offers a critical reimagining of feminine power, presenting a divine femininity that is not bound by objectification or the male gaze.

Introduction

The depiction of feminine divinity has undergone profound transformations throughout history, reflecting broader cultural and societal shifts. From ancient statues of pagan goddesses to the idealized nudes of early modern European art, the portrayal of women in divine or mythological contexts reveals the growing influence of the patriarchy in art. While figures like Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, have embodied fluctuating symbolism across time and space—sometimes representing feminine power and fertility, at other times serving as an object for male pleasure—male artists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods often emphasized the latter. Their depictions reinforced Venus's perceived passivity, stripping her of agency and rendering her a vulnerable, voyeuristic spectacle, governed by male-dominated artistic ideals. However, Artemisia Gentileschi's *Venus and Cupid* (**Figure 1**) challenges this narrative, reclaiming the image of Venus as a figure of serenity, empowerment, and maternal connection, free from the constraints of the male gaze. Through an analysis of historical contexts, depictions of the sleeping goddess by male artists, and Artemisia Gentileschi's work, we can explore early modern perceptions of gender, highlighting how artistic choices and feminist perspectives differ between male and female artists.

Figure 1.
Artemisia Gentileschi, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1625-26, oil on canvas,
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Analyzing the Sleeping Goddess

Scholars suggest that the suppression of goddess worship coincided with the rise of Christianity. However, the fall of paganism could not "subdue the impulse to worship female incarnations of the divine."[1] Many local goddesses were transformed into saints, and Christian churches often replaced pagan shrines. A notable example is the Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, built over a temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena.[2] This continuity underscores the enduring need for feminine representations of divinity. This instinct is additionally seen in the popularity of the worship of Mary as the Mother of God. For many worshipers, Mary's status became equal to that of Christ himself, with an emphasis on her role as the Mother. In a world increasingly shaped by patriarchy, childbirth was one of the few powers exclusively held by women. Men relied on women to perpetuate life, granting them an indispensable role in the continuation of society. In this way, all women, through their ability to bear children, wielded a unique and undeniable form of power.[3]

The image of a divine feminine figure plays a crucial role in shaping-self-perception. Without a feminine likeness of God to relate to, women risk being relegated to a lesser status in both spiritual and societal hierarchies. Divine representations are therefore crucial—not only for spiritual equality but also for affirming women's inherent worth and power.[4]

The Roman goddess Venus has been a central figure in art for centuries, serving as one of the most enduring and influential muses in early modern art history. From the decline of pagan worship to the creation of *Sleeping Venus* (**Figure 2**) by Italian Renaissance artist Giorgione (born Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco), the passage of time and the rise of patriarchy drastically transformed how this goddess, long associated with female sexuality and womanhood, was depicted.[5]

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[1] Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Women and art: Contested territory*, (Hertfordshire: Eagle Editions, 2004), 24.

[2] Ibid

[3] I note that not all women have a uterus, that not all people with a uterus identity as a woman, and that not all women can/want to bear children. I use the term women to describe those who were assigned female at birth and maintain that gender identity, keeping in mind the typical standards of gender within the periods of time described.

[4] Chicago and Lucie-Smith, *Women and art: Contested territory,* 20.

[5] *Venus Sleeping* is traditionally attributed to Giorgione, however it has been thought that Titian completed the painting following Giorgione's death. Both the landscape and sky are overall accepted to be primarily done by Titian's hand.

Figure 2.
Giorgione, Titian, *Sleeping Venus*, c. 1510, oil on canvas,
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

Sleeping Venus is recognized as the first known reclining female nude in modern Western art history, and established a genre of similar subjects paired with landscapes. When the female nude was initially popularized in early modern art, mythological women were mainly used as muses. This allowed the artist to "distance the image from the spectator so that, while the nude was apparently sexually available, it did not become sexually threatening."[6] These women were otherworldly and therefore available to be rendered in ways that real, living women were not socially and morally allowed to be.

Giorgione's painting is a clear example of the male gaze as manifested in the art world. "The male gaze," Mary Devereaux explains, "involves more than simply looking; it carries with it the threat of action and possession." The power to possess is not reciprocal.[7]

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[6] Chicago and Lucie-Smith, *Women and art: Contested territory,* 102.

[7] Mary Devereaux, "Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator," (*Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, 1995)

Giorgione's Venus lays on the ground, reclining atop a silvery-white textile that contrasts against a deep crimson pillow supporting her head, creating a striking balance of light and shadow. Her body is positioned diagonally across the canvas, drawing the viewer's eye along the curve of her figure. One arm is raised and bent behind her head, granting access to a view of her breasts. The other hand rests suggestively at her groin, with her fingers curled inwards. Venus's body is depicted as unblemished and smooth, with a flawless, almost ethereal quality. She obviously sleeps, as the title suggests, as her eyes are shut and her features are soft. The background of the painting features a quintessential Venetian-inspired landscape, with rolling hills, distant mountains, lush trees, calm waters, and quaint buildings scattered throughout. The landscape's fertile, abundant qualities could symbolize Venus's role as a goddess of fertility. Little is known about the meaning behind the painting or its relationship to other representations of sleeping women. Scholars have discovered that the work had been commissioned by Girolamo Marcello as a wedding present.[8] Images of Venus, often nude, were often commissioned for weddings. They were meant to both visually please the groom and visually inspire the bride.

In 1603, Italian artist Annibale Carracci produced *Sleeping Venus* (or *Sleeping Venus with Putti*) (**Figure 3**). Here, Venus lays in a lavish bed placed outdoors, surrounded by tens of putti. Similarly to Giorgione's *Venus*, her arm is raised and bent behind her head. Her other hand is not directly on top of her groin, but it does rest between her legs. The title may suggest that the goddess is sleeping, but a quick visual analysis shows that she could be described more fittingly as *posing*. The fingers of her right hand are flexed straight, as are her toes. Everything about her pose is both uncomfortable and unnatural. Around her, putti talk to one another, climb trees, play instruments, and overall act like rowdy babies. Yet, as the title insists, she sleeps.

[8] Udo Kultermann, "Woman Asleep and the Artist," (*Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 11, No. 22 1990), 136.

Figure 3.
Annibale Carracci, *Sleeping Venus*, c. 1603, oil on canvas,
Musée Condé, Chantilly, Oise, France

In the 1528 painting *Venus and Cupid with a Satyr* (**Figure 4**) by Antonio da Correggio, the sleeping Venus is depicted as a vulnerable and passive figure, her body is exposed to both the viewer's gaze and the male figure within the composition. The adult male figure, a satyr, observes her with desire. Her slumber enhances her vulnerability, as she remains unaware of their watchful eyes. Similarly, Nicolas Poussin's *Sleeping Venus and Cupid* (1630) (**Figure 5**) features the passive figure of Venus lying in slumber, while two men in the background gaze at her from behind a tree, adding an element of voyeurism.

The passive, dormant Venus is positioned as an object of desire, subject to the lustful gaze of the male figures. One of her arms is raised, and her legs are positioned apart. This depiction underscores the theme of the male gaze, wherein Venus is reduced to a mere object for male pleasure.

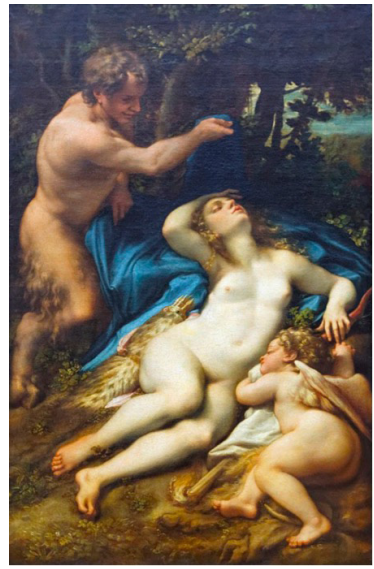

Figure 4.
Antonio da Correggio, *Venus and Cupid with a Satyr*, c. 1528,
oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre

Figure 5.
Nicolas Poussin, *Sleeping Venus with Cupid*, c. 1630,
oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

Discussion

Why did these artists choose to depict Venus in a state of sleep? In their paintings, Venus's sleep, coupled with her nudity, renders her completely vulnerable—unable to resist or even be aware of the gaze of the spectator. She exists to be a "passive object of the male libido."[9] She becomes entirely passive, a figure who exists solely for the male viewer. This portrayal transforms Venus, once a powerful symbol of feminine divinity and sovereignty, into an object for male desire. By depicting her as asleep, the male artists turn Venus, traditionally seen as the embodiment of the divine feminine power, into a passive sex symbol. The innate power of the female body was overpowered by the priority of a man's pleasure. Venus – now the perceived epitome of sex and the idealized beauty – is put to sleep. Why is such a historically divine figure like Venus, one of the most respected and worshipped goddesses of antiquity, depicted in such a vulnerable way? Why is she asleep, and why is she watched?

The act of putting Venus to sleep serves as a powerful symbolic gesture. Sleep is often associated with passivity, submission, and an unconscious state, making it a fitting metaphor for the way in which these artists depict Venus as no longer an active, powerful deity but rather an object. Her nudity, a symbol of beauty and fertility in classical mythology, is now stripped of its divine power and reduced to a visual delight for the male spectator.

By painting the classical personification of love, beauty, and sex in a vulnerable state, the artist is telling his audience that they, as men, have control over such things. If they can possess a goddess in such a way, they can possess real women in such a way. It is essential to challenge the traditional, male-centered interpretations of how sleeping women have been portrayed in art and to reevaluate how these depictions reflect broader-gender dynamics in society. The fetishization of the nude female sleeping without religious or ritualistic function could have originated as far back as Roman times. In the first century B.C., Roman poet Propertius, in his third Elegy, described a slumbering woman as viewed by her lover. In this poem, Propertius "demonstrates a male perspective towards a woman reduced to an object." The nature of their relationship is unknown, and she is

[9] Chicago and Lucie-Smith, Women and art: Contested territory, 101.

unable to respond to his gaze. An image like the one described by Propertius paralleled the role of women in Roman society, which was "determined by the emotions, reactions, and exploitation of women."[10]

Works by artists such as Giorgione, Carracci, Correggio, and Poussin demonstrate how the motif of the sleeping mythological woman became a favored theme during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Paintings of this nature can undoubtedly be described as the epitome of the male gaze as seen in early modern art, but what happens when the gaze shifts? What happens when the person holding the paintbrush is a woman?

Venus and Cupid (also known as *Sleeping Venus*) (**Figure 1**) was made around 1625 - 1626 by Italian Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi. The goddess lays on a plush bed of a rich blue color, which was painted with two layers of lapis lazuli.[11] Her head rests on a red pillow with gold tassels. The expertly rendered fabrics undoubtedly were inspired by Orazio Gentileschi, her father and fellow Baroque artist who famously excelled in fabrics.

The deep red color of both the pillow and curtains behind her could be influenced by Caravaggio, who worked with Orazio. She wears nothing but a thin strip of sheer fabric that encircles her right thigh and weaves behind her back and around her left upper arm, ending at her hand. Her fingers loosely clasp the end of the wispy scarf. Her other hands rest gently on her waist. Her milky-white skin almost appears as if it is glowing. Venus' body is extremely naturalistic, just as is every other nude female body painted by Artemisia. Her curves, her stomach, and her breasts appear almost indistinguishable from a true bare female form. Her round cheeks, long nose, and small chin are all facial features of Artemisia herself. It was common for the artist to use herself as a muse. The face is in profile, facing up towards the heavens, not towards the presumed viewer (like Giorgione paints). There is a small, soft smile of ease and relaxation on her lips. On her ear we can see a large pearl earring, an attribute to Venus in reference to her birth from the sea.

Cupid, son of Venus, stands by his mother's head and peers down at her with a sense of familiarity. He appears a bit older than his usual depic-

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[10] Udo Kultermann, "Woman Asleep and the Artist," (*Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 11, No. 22 1990), 130-134

[11] Keith Christiansen and Judith W. Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 372.

tion as an infant, perhaps being an older toddler. Like his mother, he wears only a thin, wispy strip of fabric. His typical wings are alert and perked. In one hand, he holds a bundle of peacock feathers. In antiquity, peacock feathers were usually attributed to the queen of the gods and patroness and women and children, Juno. Although not an attribute to Venus or Cupid, it does make sense to place the feathers in such a setting; not only did they represent a goddess' royalty (and therefore her divinity), but also womanhood and motherhood. It is unclear exactly what Cupid is doing with the fan of feathers, but he could be in the act of fanning air on his mother or swatting away bothersome pests.

Unlike paintings made by her male counterparts, Artemisia's Venus is indoors and enclosed in her own space. A glimpse to the outside world can be seen through a window that takes up the upper left corner of the artwork. I propose that this can be read as Artemisia gifting Venus a privacy that her male counterparts do not. The lone temple among the flourishing landscape recalls ancient buildings dedicated to Vesta, Roman goddess of the home and family. Artemisia may have known this and may have seen such structures while working in Rome. Perhaps, she intended to set a pagan mindset and suggest "that the viewer participates in surreptitious worship of the goddess of beauty."[12] This would be highlighting the act of worshiping a female deity, and therefore retaining the idea of Venus as a divine goddess. While Artemisia utilizes common motifs found in paintings of the same subjects, such as the presence of Cupid, a visible landscape, and the act of sleep, the "emphasis of the painting is directed in new ways towards the viewer."[13]

Some scholars suggest that *Venus and Cupid* was commissioned, primarily due to the use of the expensive lapis lazuli and the unusual subject. However, no evidence of a patron survives, and at the time of this work's creation Artemisia was already very successful and could have had access to expensive supplies. It is true that the subject matter of *Venus and Cupid* may seem odd among Artemisia's portfolio. For instance, she is known for her paintings of heroines (such as *Judith in Judith Slaying Holofernes* and *Jael in Jael and Sisera*), of victims (such as Lucretia in *Lucretia* and Danaë in *Danaë*), or figures that overlap as both heroine and victim (such as Susanna in *Susanna and the Elders and Cleopatra in Cleopatra*). As a teenager, Artemisia was raped by her tutor, who was also a friend of her

[12] Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, 373.

[13] Kultermann, "Woman Asleep and the Artist," 140.

father. Around a year later, Orazio began the prosecution against his daughter's rapist. During trial, Artemisia had to endure not only reliving her trauma, but also torture by means of thumbscrews.[14] Her internal turmoil over these events is evident in her portfolio. Elizabeth S. Cohen proposes that Artemisia's history as a victim of rape "overshadows much discussion of the painter and has come to distort our vision," and that "biographers and critics have had trouble seeing beyond the rape."[15] Cohen implores that Artemisia's "reputation continues to be violated in the present by an overly sexualized interpretation."[16] This tells us why some scholars insist on a patron for the piece, and say that *Venus and Cupid* serves as evidence of Artemisia's "willingness to respond to the requests of male patrons."[17] I must disagree.

Even if this piece was commissioned, which there is no evidence of, I propose that Artemisia would not bend to the will of a male patron seeking a voyeuristic image of the Roman goddess. Several of her pieces of heroines and victims had patrons, and this did not yield her from using the artworks as outlets for her personal sentiments. At this point in her life, Artemisia was living as a single woman, after her husband had disappeared from her life in 1622, leaving her with her only surviving daughter (most of her children had died young).[18] She was a young, single woman, as well as a single mother. Her late adolescence had been disrupted by the sexual assault, but in the mid-1620s while she was in her early 30's, living without a husband and with a doting child, *Venus and Cupid* does not seem so out of place. Although Venus is no tyrant-slaying Judith or grief-stricken Lucretia, she is both a victor and victim in her own right. And, just as Artemisia paints Judith's features after her own, she paints her face on Venus. Unlike Venus as painted by Giorgione or Carracci, Artemisia offers a view of the sleeping goddess in an exclusively feminine, understanding way. *Venus and Cupid* shows the goddess in a genuinely restful state, not appearing as if posing for a voyeur. She is comfortable in her nudity and knowledgeable of her divine beauty. Her feminine body is celebrated, not fetishized. Her child brings a tender presence, as he dotes on his mother and reassures her comfort.

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[14] Elizabeth S. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," (*The Sixteenth Century Journal, Special Edition: Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2000), 47

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, 373.

[18] Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," 50.

Conclusion

Artemisia Gentileschi offers us a rare and empowering vision of the divine feminine, presenting a figure of peace and serenity that is free from the oppressive gaze of male spectators. In her works, the absence of the male gaze allows women to encounter a reflection of the divine in themselves, portraying female figures not as passive objects but as subjects with inherent power, grace, and autonomy. Artemisia's art challenges traditional representations and enables women to see themselves as divine beings, capable of embodying strength and beauty without the distortion of male desire or objectification. This shift in perspective fosters a sense of spiritual equality, where the divine is not only reserved for men but also accessible to women.

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