

How has the representation of the female form changed since the early Renaissance?

The depiction of the female form has evolved immensely since the early Renaissance, transforming from submergence of innocence and sensuality within *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli (1486) and *The Venus of Urbino* by Titian (1538); each depicting the female body as an image of untouchable beauty and lust. Modern interpretations have explored beyond this conventional approach, challenging the traditional conception that the female form retains beauty only when reflected in this quintessential manner. Artists Jenny Saville and David Jay, question the limitation of the historical interpretation. Both highlight and glorify the imperfections of the body and challenge the notion that beauty is one-dimensional, portraying imperfections and the scars of life as aesthetic assets, evidencing internal and external battles overcome.



Figure 1: *The Birth of Venus*, Sandro Botticelli, 1484-1486.

Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* depicts the Goddess of love and beauty riding into Cyprus on a seashell, her figure a symbol of beauty and spirituality; and has remained a historic art treasure since the early Renaissance. The nudity was particularly daring, as at that time nude artwork was a novel concept. Botticelli's painting almost catalysed the obsession with the female form, sparking a tradition in developing perceptions of female beauty among artists. Botticelli's muse is said to be based on Simonetta Vespucci, renowned as the greatest beauty of her age in Florence. Botticelli's depicted Venus as angelic and flawless, creating deep contours within her body to elicit a toned and curvaceous figure, perhaps to develop sensuality, appealing to the ideal male desire. The representation of Venus reflects the change in the female perception, from objects of fertility, to figures of lust and beauty. Venus' facial features are flawless, a milky complexion and symmetrical face, making her flesh seem as if "made out of marble, underscoring the sculptural nature of her body"¹. Venus' hair is also a luscious golden colour, depicting her as a treasure and object of value, setting the beauty standard for women as an untouchable quintessential figure. Botticelli's

¹ ItalianRenaissance.org (2012), Botticelli's Birth of Venus [Online], Available at: <http://www.italianrenaissance.org/botticelli-birth-of-venus/>

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Venus emphasises rejection of deformity or flaw and suggests that beauty can only be defined by physical faultlessness. Venus riding on a shell, similarly identifies her as an untouchable prized possession, paralleled to a pearl, a sacred object, rare and in need of careful preservation. The comparison to an object of great worth, emphasises the concept that the physical attractiveness of women established their worth within society. Through Botticelli's romanticisation of Venus, the observer establishes the unattainable expectations of the ideal woman. The comparison of Venus to valuable and rare objects may be interpreted as depicting the enchanting female exterior as unique and not a reflection of the average woman. His artwork is meant to replicate the metaphysical figure of a Goddess and therefore an unobtainable standard. The fact that Botticelli seeks his inspiration from a notorious beauty, signifies this underlying desire to raise the expectations and create this image of aesthetic desire.



Figure 2: *Botticelli Reimagined*, Yin Xin, 2008.

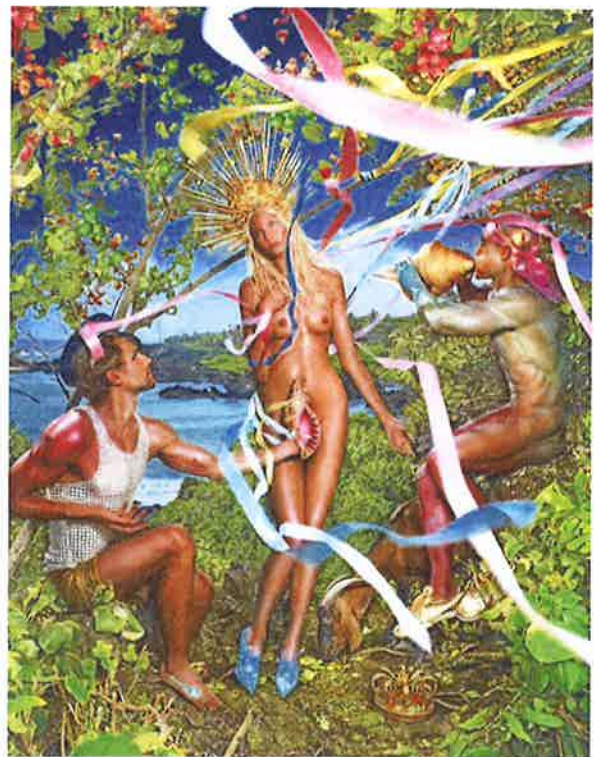


Figure 3: *Rebirth of Venus*, David LaChapelle, 2009.

Modern interpretations of Botticelli's classic painting are interesting to compare the changing perceptions. Latter-day art has challenged the depiction of the ideal woman as European, white and blonde, extending the concept of female beauty culturally.

Yin Xin's '*Botticelli Reimagined*' 2008, reworked the original by giving the model oriental facial features and black hair. Yin Xin's focus is on the facial features to highlight the restricted cultural barriers within traditional painting, where models are predominantly European. This may also reflect the development within society, allowing the depiction of beauty within different cultural contexts; difficult in the Early Renaissance due to the lack of cultural integration. Modern interpretations of the female form have thus progressed culturally, extending beauty on an international scale. However, Yin Xin still paints his model in the 'untouchable' manner, with completely flawless pale skin and symmetrical features

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with smooth but distinct contours in the face, signifying the continuing expectation of women as externally faultless.

David LaChapelle's *'Rebirth of Venus'* photograph, in 2009, similarly attempts to recreate the traditional painting, but instead of extending beauty standards across a wider spectrum, transforms the traditional piece into a representation of the modern expectation of the female. The photograph places a tanned model with a smaller waist and blonder hair to highlight the C21st expectations of perfection. There are greater sexual undertones within the photograph, the shell is covering her genitals, focusing on the model's sexual organs. LaChapelle's sexualisation of his model suggests a reformed respect and sense of spiritual innocence towards women, replacing it with an oversexualised perception, establishing women as sex objects rather than objects of value and great worth; Abigail Cain disputes this, interpreting LaChapelle's work as "Unlike Botticelli's original", instead obtaining "an air of raw sexuality".² LaChapelle's depiction of the original figure does however highlight how little society has changed, setting high expectations for female physicality and presenting how limited beauty standards remain in modern culture. Whilst presenting how the image of the ideal female form has changed according to cultural desire and popularity, the representation has not; woman are still provided with unattainable images of beauty, rather than art recognising beauty within the average woman.



Figure 4: *Venus of Urbino*, Titian, 1538.

Titian's *'Venus of Urbino'* mirrors Botticelli's idolisation and quixotic interpretation of the female, but applies greater sexual undertones, separating from this notion of innocence, instead depicting the female body as a sex object or even an image of fantasy. The model's slouched and relaxed posture and the use of warm red tones display a provocative and

² Cain, A.C, (2018) A Look at Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" in Pop Culture [Online]. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-botticellis-birth-venus-pop-culture>

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sensual confidence. Art & Critique examines Venus' "seductive pose" focusing on "the ambivalence of the left hand gesture", questioning whether the model conceals herself "rendering a sign of modesty" or is instead touching herself implying the opposite.³

Both Botticelli and Titian recognise and try to sexualise the female figure, however, Titian applies greater emphasis on the model's sensuality through the erotic connotations; a transformation from portraying women in an innocent and idolised light, instead depicting them as a sexually arousing object for observation. However, through the inclusion of symbols such as the red roses, the vase of myrtle on the windowsill, the curled up dog (a common symbol of marital fidelity) and the maid shown searching for the figure's bridal garments, there is a sense of ownership and marital control. Titian's painting is interpreted to have been commissioned by Guidobaldo della Rovere (Duke of Urbino), for his young wife Giulia Varano da Camerino (married for political reasons), to remind her of her erotic duties as a wife. As such, the painting portrays a desire to contain and control, presenting the female as a sexually obedient possession. The title of the painting is also significant, as by labelling the figure as Venus, Titian makes it socially acceptable to declare the painting as an image of admiration, rather than pornography. The title shows us how labelling these women as mythical creatures rather than real women, male artists may circumvent the concept of their work as erotic or pornographic.

Both Titian and Botticelli apply the same modesty within their compositions, by concealment of the genitals. However, Titian's use of the model's hands to hide the body part, applies a greater sense of sensuality than Botticelli, and represents the progression from expressing the female figure as a symbol of innocence, to instead an image of seductiveness.

Titian does however create the same sense of purity as Botticelli through glazing the paint, adding soft tones to the skin, alluding to visual innocence. Titian's soft and thin brush strokes, the sexual pose and the model's gaze directly towards the observer, makes the figure alluring and intimate when compared to Botticelli's image, transforming the depiction of the female form as a symbol of lust rather than a figure of beauty, purity and innocence.

³ Art & Critique, (2012) Titian: Venus of Urbino [Online]. Available at: <http://artandcritique.com/titian-venus-of-urbino/>

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Figure 5: *Propped*, Jenny Saville, 1992.

In contrast, modern artist Jenny Saville's painting '*Propped*' protests the depiction of the female form as flawless, sexual and without imperfections. Saville's interpretation reflects her interest in flesh, in its resilience and fragility, as well as her feminist views and desire to reassemble traditional conceptions of female beauty; thus heavily distinguished from Titian and Botticelli. Saville's self-portrait opposes the notion of the perfect female body, showing a distorted and enlarged body, sitting awkwardly on a small stool. Her choice of perspective, enlarging the legs and cutting out part of the face, forces a focus on the disfigured body. Not only does Saville heavily juxtapose both Botticelli and Titian's choice of positioning to imply a greater sense of fear and intense vulgarity, but her use of thick and heavy brushstroke, along with the variation of darker skin tones, separates the female figure from the image of perfection, innocence and sensuality; transforming it into an image of grotesque distress. Saville desires the viewer to confront their own perceptions of beauty and examine societies fear to acknowledge what the media regards as unworthy for confrontation. The figure is shown to be almost clawing into the thigh flesh, signifying frustration at the inability to love oneself or the discomfort felt towards being in their own body.

Saville directly contrasts Titian's '*Venus of Urbino*' where the model appears to be much more comfortable and aware of her body, but this could signify the purpose of the work and the distinct difference between the artists. Titian's composition is more about pleasing the observer aesthetically and, being painted by a man, is more concerned with presenting the female as an object for male speculation and pleasure. Saville uses her painting to encourage the observer to look beyond the composition and experience a moment of self-reflection, adding a deeper and more personalised element to her work. Saville's personal attachment and recognition of the mental and physical effects of the image of the desirable female signified in both Botticelli and Titian's pieces, enable her to apply a more

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personalised and conceptual approach, explore beyond aesthetic pleasure and reach the observer in a much deeper sense, educating as opposed to arousing them. Moreover, the figure propped on a stool and naked, suggests vulnerability and displays the subject as an object to be judged or evaluated rather than a human with emotional capabilities. Saville's choice of positioning and nakedness emphasises the feelings of vulnerability experienced by the modern-day woman towards their physical appearance. The addition of the words engraved into Saville's work, reversed (so that it appears that the text is for the subject rather than the observer), are derived from *'When Our Lips Speak Together'* by the French Feminist writer Luce Irigaray. Saville writes on her portrait "If we continue to speak in this sameness - speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again, words will pass through our bodies, above our heads - disappear, make us disappear". Irigaray argues for an end to the patriarchal nature of society and against the silencing of women in the public sphere, to prevent this female disappearance. Saville used the text within her work to "Act as a mirror, in which I could see my own position" (Jenny Saville in conversation with Martin Gayford, *ibid.*, p.30), ⁴representing her desire to confront the patriarchal control within society over female self-perception, challenging the observer to recognise the clear power male influence has over female body dysmorphia. The original piece was intended to be displayed opposite a mirror, giving the viewer the option to face the painting as a metaphorical mirror or to face the mirror, making the writing legible, and thereby placing the observer as the object of the work, forcing them to consider their own self-perception and the role of male dominance and their own self-worth. Saville's work juxtaposes Botticelli's and Titian's in terms of its deeper meaning and ultimate purpose. Botticelli and Titian's paintings of Venus aimed to signify the female form in a perfected, sensual and untouchable light; whereas, Saville attempts to contradict and depreciate both artists' efforts to produce an image of flawlessness. Saville forces the observer to confront a traditionally grotesque image, suggested unfit for human examination, encouraging the viewer to reflect on the influence of the media and patriarchal society on female beauty and acceptable body image, signifying a clear transformation in the representation of the female form as a consequence of the recognition of female suppression through male dominance. Saville explores the female internally as opposed to solely externally, showcasing the impact of society on self-perception; thus, representing the transformation through art in the willingness to confront the role of male influence on female self-worth and also the nature of art, transforming into an act of self-reflection, rather than purely for aesthetic satisfaction. Saville may have had greater freedom to explore this, as it is a self-portrait and as a woman is able to acknowledge and reflect on this patriarchal influence and internal frustration towards its control on art and society through her artwork.

⁴ Sotheby's (2019) THE HISTORY OF NOW: THE COLLECTION OF DAVID TEIGER. [Online] Available at:

<http://www.sothebys.com/fr/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.6.html/2018/history-of-now-collection-david-teiger-118623>

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Figures 6, 7, 8, & 9: *The Scar Project*, David Jay, 2012.

David Jay's *The Scar Project*, includes a series of photographs of young women and men who have undergone surgery for breast cancer, showcasing and proudly presenting their scars. Jay reveals the reality of the body, insinuating that instead of trying to conceal these scars, we should use them to represent the pain and suffering endured, also as a means for reflection, awareness and hope for a brighter future. Jay and Saville explore this honest depiction of the human body, however, Jay juxtaposes Saville in his presentation of the female figure, glorifying external damage as a reflection of history and battles overcome. Both Jay and Saville aim to protest against traditional forms of the perfect naked female body and look at beauty in an honest light. Both aim to depict Botticelli and Titian's portraits as an unrealistic reflection of the nude woman, exploring the beauty of flaws that represent what we have endured and been strong enough to tackle. Within Jay's photograph there is a clear element of pride and strength within the poses, visually displaying and essentially flaunting the scars rather than trying to conceal them. Jay tends to crop from the torso to the top of each model's head, to ensure the scars are at the forefront of each composition, signifying the battles with cancer as something to take pride in, rather than shy away from. Jay contradicts the shame and vulnerability within Saville's portrait and encourages the viewer to experience a feeling of elation for the bravery of these victims. Saville's work is a lot more personal and relies on self-reflection, but Jay's work distances the viewer from their own personal experiences and influences them to acknowledge the courage of others. Jay's

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greyscale colour scheme and use of intense shadow in the creases of the skin, adds a greater depth and emotion to each image. The absence of vibrant colour allows the observer to focus on the figure rather than its colour scheme, but also signifies the dark periods the survivors have endured. The black and white images insinuate that the victims, despite the tragedies and darkness endured, still obtain this humanity and shifts the focus to the person rather than solely on the scars. Jay's portraits aim to depict each individual in a different light, from expressions of pride, seriousness, joy and carelessness. In all images he captures the undeniable strength and sense of endurance and sends a message to the observer to apply an element of acceptance to their own scars and impurities. Jay represents the female body as a protective shield rather than something to be concealed.



Figure 10

Considering the progression of the depiction of the female form diachronically, there has been an ultimate shift from representing the female body in as idealistic towards a more realistic portrayal. Art of this sort has expanded from focussing on the external beauty and sensuality of a woman, to considering the internal and therefore psychological damage inflicted upon women as a result of such images. Taking into account the work of artists such as Jenny Saville and her self-portrait *'Propped'*, I have produced a piece that, like Saville, explores the internal damage inflicted not only upon me but also other women (Figure 10). I was inspired by Saville to display within my own self-portrait the psychological distress caused by the media's critical and negative interpretations of the female body, continuing with the theme of self-reflection. Inspired by Saville's manipulation of reflection, I painted my own portrait on a mirror, compelling the observer to look at either themselves or my painting, forcing them to consider their own self-perception and potentially the effects the media has on them. My composition comprises two pieces, one on a mirror and the other on a clear acetate overlay. The image on the mirror obtains an expression of almost loss of hope and is painted with a cooler colour palette of blues and purples to signify an element of

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sleeplessness and distress. I used a harsher and more pigmented colour palette to juxtapose the softer and more toned down colour pigments within Botticelli and Titian's paintings, to depict a sense of perfection and disregard the natural varied tinges in the skin. I chose to combine this portrait with another image, to obtain more of an obvious external agony, reflecting the true internal frustration experienced by the figure. Through stripping back the colour of the portrait, inspired by David Jay's *'The Scar Project'* photography collection, I have shifted the focal point onto the expression as opposed to the race, ethnicity and therefore identity of the model, representing the universal nature of the internal damage caused by the media and other public outlets. I aimed to display this element of extreme darkness and psychological chaotic disorder caused by the pressure placed on women to encompass a particular image of beauty, representing how this experience evokes an element of lifelessness within its victims. I felt that by displaying two separate expressions through the two paintings I created this juxtaposition between the external and internal representation of psychological distress as a result of a damaged self-perception. For displaying my piece, I created an installation room in which I constructed a dark enclosed space, with strings of lights to create a space for intimate reflection. I showcased my other images of visual distress taken in the same photoshoot, edited using photoshop and layered together to create the same visual representation of internal and external frustration seen in my final piece. I placed mirrors within the room and ripped up magazine articles, scattered on the floor, forcing the observer to consider the influence of the media on their own internal value, provoking a sense of deep psychological recognition, protesting the perfected visual expectations placed on women currently, and throughout history.

The transformation from early Renaissance artists such as Titian and Botticelli to modern artists like Jenny Saville and David Jay display an undeniable attempt to reform ideas surrounding the female body. All artists evaluated sought to portray a particular message, using the nude female figure, therefore presenting its power in acting as a reflection of the social status of society. The female nude has proven to be a valuable asset to the development of art and a figure that sparks inquisitiveness within society. The interpretation of the female body has transformed significantly from the Renaissance, evolving from a symbol of beauty, purity, innocence, sexuality and perfection, to an image that reflects strength, and in some cases vulnerability. The figure in art has ameliorated by the fact it no longer acts as an aesthetic asset, but instead signifies a message, concept and triggers a moment of self-reflection for viewers. Modern interpretations of the female have been used to challenge the idealistic body of a woman, using interpretation to replicate the changing nature and protest of society against gender inequality and the media's damaging influence on perceptions of our own and others' bodies. Both Saville and Jay's portrayals contrast each other in their concepts, but depict the same message, protesting the perfected interpretation and expectation of female bodies, forcing observers to take pride in their appearance, despite the media's rejection of imperfections. I have aimed to achieve the same element of internal frustration and evoked a sense of external reflection within my own self-portrait, challenging ideas of beauty and perfection and using my composition as a work of artistic honesty and protest against the visual suppression of women through art.

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