

# Gendered Violence in Art: A Study of Baroque and Classical Ages

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**Abstract.** Art and history are always mirrors of each other. Their specific modes of functioning, despite being dissimilar to each other, are still consonant. Consciousness of time is common to them, traveling continuously through the past and future, creating the present. But art; its representation, subversion, methods, spaces, humans and life is sometimes contrarian to the march of history. Art often defies history by rejecting the 'present' and creating its own utopia. "Indeed, music protects its social truth by virtue of its antithesis to the society, by virtue of isolation, yet by the same measure, this isolation lets music wither. It is as if its stimulus to production, its *raison d'être*, had been withdrawn.

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## 1 Introduction

The 'present' is not one's interpretation of the current events. It is rather a non-subjective acknowledgment of existing in this world, a priori to the subjective experiences of it. On the other hand, history is an understanding of time through particularistic views on events. Thus, 'present' is closer to 'time' than 'history'. An object of art is the epitome of the timeless present and yet a product of the history of events. It rebels against its authoritative "artistic" interpretations, i.e., the history. Despite being chained by his circumstances; the artist transcends it by the act of creation. When history is classified into different eras, we recognize the antagonism between it and the 'present'. The resistance to art and its mainstreaming are the product of the 'present' and history.

For the sake of simplicity and in conformity to the theoretical background presented, this essay takes paintings and music to be representative of art. They are the most mass-produced statements and a public spectacle of what 'art' means. The Baroque period (the 1600s-1700s) and Classical period (1700s-1850s) is taken to be the quintessential representations not only metaphysically but also for harboring the gargantuan socio-economic upheavals of their ages.

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This article seeks to 'find' the elements of gendered violence in art. Of course, our versions of gender and violence are newer compared to these object's d'art. While doing so, it also mentions the motives of the artist and the 'symbols' that can be constructed and derived. It must be obvious that art never has any 'intended' meaning. We impute our connotations because we are definite products of history, and art must always be seen as an aberration in our world.

## **2 Some Selected Paintings in the Baroque and Neo-Classical Eras**

The Baroque era succeeded the original Renaissance. This era is remarkable for its location in the process of history. The period of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century is unique in anticipating the mammoth changes that were yet to come but not being sure of them. It does not have the optimism of the Renaissance but the hope of a glorious industrial revolution that would make Europe conquer the world.



**Figure 1:** Judith Beheading Holofernes, Caravaggio, 1599-1622

The famous masterpiece of Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* is a reflection of this religious contestation, albeit from a time before Christ. It captures a stark realism of Biblical imagery, departing from earlier ecclesiastical depictions. The Israeli widow Judith beheads Holofernes, the Assyrian commander, after getting him drunk. Judith represents an Israel, who was helpless before a stronger invading army, wins due to the fear created after Holofernes's murder. Crucially, the Israelis were of an Abrahamic religion crouching against a pagan enemy.

The composition is equally interesting as the story. The general is caught unaware and naked before becoming the subject of fatal violence. He is shown halfway between life and death, and it is a woman who has killed him (one of whom would have given him birth). Judith's face shows abhorrence yet determination to carry out this unspeakably important task. She is accompanied by a maid who shows menacing attitudes, probably a representation of class attitudes that lower classes are much more tolerant and accepting of violence. This painting is a celebration of brutality. The norms of violence are turned as the meek widow is beheading the General.

An ancient textual discourse of Judith deciding to leave for the Assyrian camp to seduce the General and slay him is illuminating. "Lord God of my father Simeon, who gavest him a sword to execute vengeance against strangers, who had defiled by their uncleanness, and uncovered the virgin unto confusion" (...) "And who gavest their wives to be made a prey, and their daughters into captivity: and all their spoils to be divided to the servants, who were zealous with thy zeal: assist, I beseech thee, O Lord God, me a widow."

The section where Judith is preparing to leave for her bloody assignment is also noteworthy. "And she called her maid, and going down into her house, she took off her haircloth and put away the garments of her widowhood." And she washed her body, and anointed herself with the best ointment (...), and clothed herself with the garments of her gladness (...) and adorned herself with all her ornaments. (...) And the Lord also gave her more beauty: because all this dressing up did not proceed from sensuality, but from virtue" (The Book of Judith). There are several themes in this composition that are worth noting while keeping the thirty years of war in the background; the violent widow, the naked and unprepared General, the huge but meek Assyrian army, religion and war, the pure vs. impure races, the crimson background, and the ugly maid. Interestingly, these two different portrayals of women are very unlike the next important work to be discussed.

The Milkmaid by Vermeer is a masterpiece in the artistic and aesthetic sense. The painting reeks of photographic realism, a technique mastered by the then-contemporary artists. In several insightful works on the depiction of working-class women of the time, a variety of issues crop up. "The stereotypes of milkmaid and ploughman enjoyed a wide popular appeal throughout the long eighteenth century in Britain (...). It represented an ideal of peasant beauty and sexual attractiveness" (Ganev, 2007). For the male audience, this portrait would reflect an "element of fantasy as subtle as the shadows on the whitewashed walls" (Liedtke, 2009).

The sexual labels of "potency" of milkmaids are counterpoised against the impotent nobility, and thus, the consciousness of the socio-political need for a systemic change arises. The socio-biological views of the time fused with the evolutionary matrix ensured that sex was seen as beneficial, in concurrency with the physiologists whose only concern was the prevention of scarcity and depopulation.



**Figure 2.** The Milkmaid, Vermeer, 1657-58

However, by the nineteenth century, the governmental discourse had professed the Malthusian concerns on sexual freedom. In the nineteenth century Europe suffered from politically volatile situations as leading to “poverty, wars, famines, and epidemics, (...) (the) direct and inevitable results of sexual promiscuity” (Ganev, 2007). The moral reformists of the eighteenth century lambasted these sexual stereotypes as symbols of degeneration. The Baroque era, despite being the product of counter-reformation, celebrated them in a subtle manner.

However, the nineteenth-century too rejoiced them in its own way, the spread of mass media among the publicans ensured that songs like these were enjoyed- “Town Lass; looks with her white Face; And lips of deadly pale; but it is not so; with those that go; through frost and Snow with Cheeks; that glow; to carry the milking pail” (The Milking-Pail, 2021). The depiction of a woman in Baroque composition as a central figure also marks a departure from Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man, i.e., one-dimensional and unisex subject. The space for the strict Victorian gender roles was created. A byproduct of this was class variations in the natures of men. The lustful, strong, warlike martial races of working-class led the imperial project of conquering the world. In the Baroque era, they had dominated their own women; in the Classical epoch, they sought to subjugate the world.

The strong biological-anatomical meanings from The Milkmaid can also be seen in The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp. This piece marks the changing point of the Dutch Golden Age. Rembrandt has employed a *miss-en-scene*, i.e., passive dramatics. The painting shows an investigation of the corpse of Aris Kindt, a criminal sentenced to death for armed robbery. Such anatomical lessons were conducted in public settings, as entertainment in Protestant countries, for some fees. The Church, however was averse to dismemberments as that desecrated the human body, a gift of God.



**Figure 3.** The Anatomy Lesson by Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, Rembrandt, 1632

Interestingly despite stark realism, this scene is fictional and unscientific. The actual dissections began from the most perishable parts of the body, not the tendons. The result of this religious-medico tradition reflects upon the central position of the doctor who is performing violence on a defenseless body publicly. Another parallel can be drawn between the “martyred” corpse for the cause of progress and the martyred Christ. The “wounded arms,” the radiant corpse, the “naked and helpless state,” the body lying in an altar-like slab all indicate this. Further, “the artist depicted the doctor as a Magnus who rids the community of evil by making the body of the executed criminal socially evil. (...) Tulp, a learned humanist, established the iconography involving the double message of knowing God and knowing oneself” (Mitchell, 1994).

The reconciliation of science and art is very suggestive. The doctor uses his “scientific gaze” and wreaks violence on the body; his attention is perceptive of “the natural philosophy, (and) may be organized around the corpse, but in order not to see it” (Mitchell, 1994). “The painting represents “the social theater of mastery” (Mitchell, 1994). The dynamics of fully covered nobles in their respectable attire vs. the exposed and naked body of the criminal are brought to light. These men are “armoured” by their clothes and stable lives, whereas “Aris Kindt no longer even “owns” his body, which is the property of the state and is being dismembered. It is ironic that the thief’s crime against private property has resulted in his loss of body ownership and has allowed Tulp and the guild members to acquire it” (Mitchell, 1994).

To interrogate the relationship of men with religion and economy, Caravaggio’s masterpiece St. Jerome Writing comes to mind. The principal figure of St. Jerome, a European saint, is of historical interest. He wrote to his friend about pagan widows, “Such women always paint their faces with rouge and about in silk dresses, they strut about in silk dresses, (...). They rejoice that at last, they have escaped from a husband’s supremacy, and look about for another, not intending to obey him, according to the law of God, but rather command him” (Pence, 1941).



**Figure 4.** St. Jerome Writing, Caravaggio, 1607-08

The Pope V's nephew commissioned this work from Caravaggio. Here St. Jerome is seen translating the deathless holy texts into Latin (the Protestant nations wanted translations of Bible into their local languages, to which the Church had refused). St. Jerome's image of a 'public intellectual' is much clear here. In the painting, the existence of ascetism and intense intellectualism exist alongside the Baroque style, with the scene always in movement, the humanist portrayal of a religious figure, and the presence of a skull reminding one of the fragilities of life.

A spiritual relationship crated through the "tangibility of the supernatural" (Chorpenning, 1987). The characteristic counter reformativ techniques "prescribed that the meditator imagine a religious scene as if it were taking place before him "now," or as if he were present at the historical moment, and then participate in it by means of the senses, or, more exactly, their analogs in the imagination" (Chorpenning, 1987). Thus, works of this kind created a gendered history that was not bounded b historical time and sought to produce intense imagery to impress the viewer.



**Figure 5.** The Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede, 1668-70

The Dutch chef-d'oeuvre *Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede* by Jacob van Ruisdael is worth mentioning. This landscape has a characteristic Baroque background. The “mighty spaciousness” of the sky overwhelms the viewer. The “light breaks now with greater intensity through the clouds, and the clouds themselves gain in substance and volume, (...) the sky forms a gigantic vault above the earth, and it is admirable how almost every point on the ground and on the water can be related to a corresponding point in the sky” (*The Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede*, 2021).

The river is the Rhine, one of the day's most commercially viable trade routes. The central figure of the windmill has the symbolic significance of heralding an idyllic modern age, especially in Dutch imagination. As the religious patronage declined, the artists started suiting their compositions for the wealthy Protestants. That the windmills were representative of the modern age and the rural idealism was not contradictory, and science and religion were not seen as antithetical to each other. Thus, it can be inferred that even a harmless windmill can etch the peace of the old world in one's mind and yet welcome him to the changing times ahead.

In the Baroque period, the paintings sought to idealize all the spaces while retaining penetrating natural humanism. The contradiction between the “actual” scene and the “false realistic” scene is visible in almost all the cited works. If one wishes to situate this in the libidinal political economy, one finds that the major historical landmarks of this age can suffice for explanations. This age can be deemed important for its accuracy were contradictions so aptly captured in art.



**Figure 6.** *The Death of Marat*, Jacques-Louis David, 1793

A different sort of idealization occurred in the neo-classical age too. The mentioned work shows the murder of Jean-Paul Marat, a revolutionary Jacobin and an ally of Maximillian Robespierre. A royalist Charlotte Corday murdered him after her cunning entry into his house. The letter in his hand reads, “Given that I’m unhappy, I have a right to your help”. The central figure represents a Christian martyr. His heroism for the people grants a humanist portrayal in the styles of Antiquity. His body is in the ‘classical posture’, the head and the right arm in opposed directions.

A similar work by David is *The Death of Socrates*. It is a historical fable that Socrates was given an ultimatum by the Athenian government to stop his subversive activities or consume poison. This work is masterful in choosing an antique subject and glorifying his seditious path in the

context of revolutionary activities across Europe in the painter's days. Even after poisoning himself, Socrates remains unbridled by his effects and is seen delivering sermons. The others, ordinary mortals, fear his death and lament it, even if the composition betrays no sign of such an end. He maintains the "noble simplicity and calm grandeur" of the hero. Thus, David essentially genders the history, omits the painful and 'human' death, and shows Socrates a triumph of life and truth over the immoral Athenian or French monarch.



**Figure 7.** The Death Of Socrates, Jacques-Louis David, 1787

But as the existential dilemma sets in the neo-classical age, the "rawness" of human experience dawns in the absence of a hero or an anti-hero. The Massacre of Chios by Eugène Delacroix is an example. It depicts the failed Turkish rebellion against the Ottoman Empire. The aftermath of the war is the brutal oppression by the imperial masters. Of course, the usual Christian-Muslim, Oriental-Occident, is prominent too. This painting was commissioned to draw concern from the revolutionary French against the oppression of a similar kind. The lack of any recognizable central human figure is remarkable. The displacement of human agency ravaged by the powerful historical forces shows the violence of the time. Many critics, including Lee Johnson and French commentator Stendhal, have found the Greek victims actually subjects of a plague painting. Unusual for a war painting, there are no heroic (anti-heroic) Turks, save for a single soldier.



**Figure 8.** The Massacre at Chios, Eugène Delacroix, 1822



That the sufferers are not shown in their true human beauty, and the effects of violence are very visible on their features prevents them from receiving much sympathy from the viewer, contrary to the painter's intentions. These individuals seem to have "owned" nothing, and would be up for slavery or death makes them unworthy of human kindness, even from a noble eye. While denying humanity to the victims, Delacroix ends up snatching the last weapon from their hands too.

A contrast to this warmongering is the portrait of Princesses de Broglie by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. This work can be read differently from those of the last century. The deficit of intimacy between the artist and the subject is very visible. The lady has become an object for him, unlike, say, *The Milkmaid*. This loss of the woman's individuality, as different from her looks, is poignant in many neo-classical depictions.



**Figure 9.** The Portrait of Princesses de Broglie, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, 1853

Even as a noble lady living a privileged and isolated life, her Indigo satin dress, lapis lazuli of Afghanistan, Indian loincloth, and gold-embroidered North African cloak reveal her 'global existence.' Strangely, it is her loneliness and segregation that builds an "alliance between (...) Europe and Africa" (Marlene Dumas, 2010). The vividness of color in the portrait is feminine and reflective of refinement and delicacy. It is in clear opposition to the androgyny of Baroque. The painting refuses to be a work of art but a classic example of photographic realism, without any fictional details. The emphasis on the precision and clarity of technique marked a high point of neo-classical workmanship. The 'real' portrayal is synonymous with her 'natural femininity.'

### **3 Music in Baroque and Classical Ages**

The MoMA Latin American Art Collection was inaugurated in 1943, and it was the most important in the world. It was located on the second-floor galleries and displayed 224 new acquisitions from Kirstein's trip, exhibited first. The collection amounted to 294 works: murals, oil paintings, gouaches, drawings, prints, posters, magazines, photographs. Artworks from

Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay were presented.

The music in the Baroque era underwent a revolutionary transition as a culmination of techniques and artistic sensibilities. Venice's first public space for a specific musical purpose was inaugurated in 1637. Pre-Baroque music had been denounced as childish and simplistic, devoid of emotional upheavals. The music of this epoch, without being too sentimental, incorporated the often-paradoxical elements of tonal structure and its emotive aspects. The Church and Imperial Courts commissioned music, and the artists would travel across in the hope of funds and connections, thus creating European music *per se*.

There were several technical developments in musical composition. Many significant changes in instrument manufacturing techniques were incorporated; for instance, the most coveted Stradivarius and Amadi violins were a product of the Italian genius of those days. The pianoforte, an ancestor of the modern piano, was pioneered in the baroque age. These innovations were said to be the zenith of centuries-old experimentation. This resulted into diversifying of music into the evolution of operas (dramatic music), concertos, and sonata. This was a time of great scientific discoveries. Naturally, it made the musical experience an artistic science. The belief was that the harmonic tonality (similar to mathematical progressions) could lead to specific motives of the composer being conveyed through a piece. Since most of the music was contrapuntal, the individual notes always had a pattern to them.

The Four Seasons, a masterpiece by Vivaldi, is one of the classic examples where literary sensibilities meet music. The first movement of the concerto, titled as Spring is joyful and an exact imagination of the season. One can fancy the birds chirping, tress rejoicing, and the soft rain caressing the canopy in a grandiose fashion. It seems that this spring is not a product of the composer's genius or the audiences' imaginations, but rather a worldwide and pure existence. One could express without "the intervention of intellect." The use of continuous rhythm and abrupt dynamics perhaps reflects the social mood of the time. Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* has attributed the use of allegories in Baroque music to Lutheranism. "The doctrine of justification by faith and the concomitant devaluation of the efficacy of good works (...) (is) a parallel to the allegorical process of the "emptying" of objects, images and words of (...) (their) inherent expressive (...) in order to make them function as pure signifiers" (Chafe, 1984).

The Baroque theological imagination carries with it the burden of "death" and "decay" of the Middle Ages. This violence caused by the allegorical dualism of the phonetics of alphabetical script and "hieroglyphic" or "emblematic metaphors" lies at the heart of western music. Manfred Bukofzer called Bach's music "an indirect iconology of sound" (Crist, 1996). The Baroque sense of movement in an earthly domain traversed by Godly omnipotence amidst human agency is the

guiding philosophical force. The expression of dialectics is most crucial for Baroque music theory. Adorno suggested that Bach's "abstract instrumentation" is his endeavor to reconcile the "historical forces" while striving for a utopian dream. Thus, this music is a reflection of a communist heterotopia for music as it reconciled the elements of Renaissance and religious chorales. Bukofzer described Baroque music as a "heteronomous art, subordinated to words and serving only (...) to a dramatic end that transcended music" (Chafe, 1984). And yet its 'unknown' and passionate characteristics are a reflection of the contained human condition by the Church. While remaining as religious music primarily, Baroque music gave a semantic statement against absolutism.

For Classical music, on the other hand, "The principle of polyphony (...) (was) no longer heteronomous to an emancipated harmony but as, instead, a principle at every point awaiting reconciliation with it" (Adorno, 2006). This continuous struggle was, in some manner, put to rest in classical music. "Yet dissonance is more rational than consonance insofar as it articulates the relationship of sounds, however complex, contained in it instead of buying their unity at the price of the annihilation of partial elements contained in it, that is, through a "homogenous" resonance" (Adorno, 2006). But these sets of reflections were made with the respect to Schoenberg's atonal music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We must turn to classical music to understand this curious evolution.

The birth of the symphony, pioneered by Haydn, a classical composer, was indicative of homophony in music. Harmonic progressions were modified to include enharmonic transformations, signaling the need for structured music. The new musical styles like crescendo (gradually loud sounds) and sforzando (sudden attack of sounds) were coupled with clear instructions in the music about the way it should be played. The ambiguity in Baroque music gave much independence to the performers. The classical epoch placed much emphasis on the musicians while limiting their freedom to make changes.

Haydn was averse to public recitals and remained an aristocratic musician, whereas Mozart was open to more mass music. The reinvention of folk music was crucial in building a nationalist consciousness within pan-Europeanism. This also meant that light-hearted pieces meant for a largely musically uneducated public also became mass-produced songs. Several scholars have commented on the nature of Bohemianism in the music of classical music. They posed resistance to the dominating monarchical and religious order. "The unity of aesthetics and ontology has always been the hallmark of both bohemia and the avant-garde, blurring the line between art and life has always been about the organic unity of life" (Sell, 2007). On the center stage of modernity, they embarked upon "theatricalized authenticity."

"The bohemian myth gave existential firmness to the day-to-day chaos in which many Europeans lived, gave them a kind of an ontological language with which to express popular memory, existential authenticity, cultural prerogative, and political entitlement in a society that saw regular

and legal violence against women; the poor; and political, ethnic, and epidemiological minorities” (Sell, 2007). Some have noticed Hegelian dialectics of this kind in Beethoven. Adorno drew attention to the fundamental process “of human consciousness trying to understand itself” through music by Beethoven. The composer realized that his works cannot exist without the constraints of the material world, and yet music could lead him to liberation from “particularity of the words and the words and concepts that poetry and philosophy cannot exist without.”

A process of a similar kind was noticed in Mozart, leading to some leading musicologists calling his music “feminine” and “demonic.” In *Don Giovanni*, he was “able to express the dialectic between light and darkness without courting faith (...) (, he lets) his situations to retain their existential confusion” (Clive, 1956). This state of perpetual confusion in Mozart made Karl Barth comment that his harmonies are “providence in the coherent form of which darkness is also a part, but in which darkness is no eclipse, also the deficiency which is no flaw, the sadness which cannot lead to despair, also the gloomy which is not transformed into the tragic” (Clive, 1956). That he is able to reconcile and coexist Kierkegaard and a joyful Hyperion to nothingness was his genius. “No discursive mediation of these two elements is possible, yet Mozart's music, without destroying the authenticity of either, expresses joyful affirmation always on the edge of profound nihilism.” (Clive, 1956).

The “refined spirit, delicate, sentimental, feminine” music of Mozart “changed the sex of music. (...) Instead of massiveness (of Bach and Handel) is flexibility in place of logic, sentiment, pathos in lieu of boldness,” wrote Edmund Burke in *Philosophical inquiry into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. In classical music we see “the seeking out of a remote past while peering ahead to an uncertain future” (Kamien, 1986). For some, Haydn was “childlike” and Beethoven “directly connected to politics and pathos of his time (...) (while) heroically battling for mankind” (Carpenter, 2010). The indisputable sense of otherness, the presence of impersonal and subjunctivization of self were responded to by such music.

#### **4 Conclusion**

“Art, therefore, is a structured approach to exposition, knowing and knowledge. In a cognitivist sense, works of art represent the artist’s ability to create a structure of forms that are in their relationships analogs to the forms of feeling humans experience and their thought processes” (Akpan, 2020). No final remarks could sum up the complexity of the dialectics between the historical processes and the human spirit. These pieces of art of these eras were just an illustration of how a gendered analysis could proceed without making simplistic judgments on the ‘meanings’ of a certain piece.

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