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Gender and its representation in contemporary visual art

Abstract. The aim of this study was to conduct a comprehensive examination of the evolution of gender representation in visual art from a historical perspective. The study examined the works of female artists such as S. Sherman, Y. Morimura, T. de Lempicka and Y. Ono, who challenged traditional notions of women in art and fought against systemic barriers. Particular attention was paid to the feminist critical thought presented by L. Nochlin, who analysed the structural problems complicating the representation of women in art. An assessment was provided of how historical and cultural contexts shaped the depiction of male and female roles across different eras. The influence of classical concepts on the creation of gender archetypes, which have long dominated art, was analysed. The study focused on feminist movements and their impact on the visual arts, and also examined contemporary trends in art, such as the influence of postmodernism and the critique of gender stereotypes. Artists such as J. Saville have actively explored new forms of expression and self-identification that go beyond traditional gender roles. The article also highlighted the impact of globalisation on contemporary art, which is fostering new approaches to the exploration of gender identity. Separate attention was paid to the social and cultural consequences of this evolution, including how contemporary art influences the emergence of new images and the re-evaluation of social standards. The study examined how artistic practices can contribute to broadening perceptions of gender and influence public discourse. The practical significance of the findings lies in deepening the understanding of gender representation in contemporary visual art, which can be used to shape a more inclusive art education, develop critical thinking in cultural studies, and support artistic practices that contribute to the rethinking of gender stereotypes

Keywords: artist; technique of representation; woman; painting; photography

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary cultural landscape, the issue of gender identity takes on particular significance, particularly in the context of the visual arts, which traditionally serve as a mirror of social processes and perceptions. The representation of gender in art reflects not only the aesthetic preferences of a particular era, but also the deep-seated social, cultural and ideological attitudes that shape perceptions of the roles of men and women in society. This study is particularly relevant against the backdrop of intensifying feminist criticism, growing attention to issues of inclusion, and the rethinking of traditional visual codes in a globalised world.

The study of gender representations in contemporary visual art allows not only to identify the dynamics of change in artistic practices but also to understand deeper transformations in public consciousness regarding gender roles.

As noted in the study by K. Ginis *et al.* (2023), art and design have long exerted a significant influence upon both the representation and construction of gender roles, seeking not only to visualise social beliefs but also to critically analyse and reconsider gender stereotypes. In a historical context, visual art not only depicted dominant cultural perceptions of gender but also played a role in their

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deconstruction and transformation. Within the contemporary context, visual art has become a powerful platform for the revision and reinterpretation of traditional gender roles. Over recent decades, economically developed countries such as Japan have demonstrated substantial transformations in perceptions of gender roles. In particular, studies conducted in the United States revealed that support for the concept of gender-neutral parenting increased by 20% in comparison with the previous decade.

Similar changes may also be observed in developing countries. For example, in India, the study conducted by G. Echesony (2024) revealed that attitudes towards women occupying leadership positions had improved significantly: 70% of respondents expressed support for women in leadership roles, a significant increase compared to 50% ten years ago. Similarly, in Brazil, a study by G. Spizzirri *et al.* (2021) showed that openness towards non-binary gender identities, which account for 2% of the country's population, has increased. These results point to global social changes that are also reflected in the visual arts, where new voices and perspectives are emerging that challenge traditional notions of gender. Changes in the perception of gender roles have contributed to transformations in the representation of gender in art, although these changes did not occur overnight. The authors A.A. Adeyoye *et al.* (2023) explained the statistics on mentions of women artists in art history by the fact that their works were often not attributed to them or were forgotten. For example, during Antiquity, women participated in the creation of art in ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt; however, the majority of these works were either lost or forgotten because they disappeared over time or their authorship was attributed to other artists.

In 1986, the collective of female artists known as the "Guerrilla Girls" published a report concerning the number of women artists represented in commercial galleries. As noted by C.M. Topaz *et al.* (2022), the report revealed a serious underrepresentation of women, becoming a powerful call to action in support of equality and diversity within the art world. Although certain progress has been made since that time, studies such as that conducted by A. Aspegren (2021) indicate that even in 2018 only 20% of artists represented in galleries in the United Kingdom were women, highlighting the persistence of inequality. Analysis of the art market likewise demonstrates clear signs of disparity. Research by A. Kakar & C. Lesser (2023) showed that artworks created by women accounted for less than 10% of total auction sales in 2022. Of even greater concern was the fact that a substantial proportion of these sales related to the works of only five female artists, indicating a particular concentration of interest within a limited group of authors. The study conducted by F.Y.R.P. Bocart *et al.* (2022) revealed that paintings by women artists were sold at prices 18.4% lower than those of male artists, confirming the existence of systemic economic inequality within the sphere of art. However, the history of art demonstrates that women artists maintained a significant presence despite historical restrictions.

However, during the previous and present centuries, the representation of gender in art has undergone substantial transformation owing to the efforts of artists who deconstruct traditional gender stereotypes and create new

possibilities for expressing the diversity of gender identities. The aim of this study was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of contemporary gender representation in visual art. The objectives of the research were as follows:

1. To examine how changes in the portrayal of gender roles are reflected in art.
2. How changes in the portrayal of gender roles are linked to social and cultural transformations.
3. What role these changes play in the perception and integration of diverse contemporary gender identities.

The research methodology was based on an interdisciplinary approach combining cultural studies, art history and gender analysis. Methods employed included historical-comparative analysis, content analysis of artistic works, and a critical analysis of feminist theories and approaches to the representation of gender in the visual arts.

THE CONCEPT OF GENDER AND HOW IT DIFFERES FROM THE CONCEPT OF SEX

Gender is a complex and multifaceted concept to study, as it combines both biological and social components. It can be interpreted as an embodied social construct, where specific biological factors (such as hormonal profiles or genes) intertwine with abstract aspects shaped by social and cultural interpretations. Contemporary research increasingly employs the hybrid term "gender/sex", which emphasises the close interconnection between biological, physical and perceptual factors, on the one hand, and social and cultural aspects, on the other, in the formation of gender and sexual identities. This approach broadens the understanding of gender and sex, moving away from the traditional view that distinguishes them as two separate dimensions. Traditionally, sex has been perceived as a natural, biologically determined aspect, encompassing characteristics such as hormonal composition and genetic traits, whilst gender has been viewed as a social and cultural phenomenon based on stereotypes and expectations associated with sexual dimorphism. Feminist academic works, such as that by C. Mazzuca *et al.* (2020), have found that social and cultural constructs significantly influence the formation of gender identities, highlighting the importance of viewing gender as a dynamic and interactive phenomenon rather than a static category. This helps to better understand how cultural and social forces influence the way individuals perceive and construct their gender identity in different contexts.

The concept of "gender" began to be actively discussed in the legal sphere in the late 1960s, marking a significant milestone for the legal recognition of gender identity. One of the key events of this period was the legal dispute concerning the inheritance rights of Sir Ewan Forbes, a transgender man. Sir Ewan Forbes initiated legal proceedings seeking recognition of his right to inherit through primogeniture, basing his claims upon his gender identity. This court case became particularly significant because the medical community at that time had begun to focus increasingly upon the concept of "psychological sex" or self-identification, thereby emphasising the complexity and multidimensionality of gender identity. The conclusions reached by medical experts became an important argument in the judge's decision, which recognised Forbes's gender identity (Playdon, 2021).

However, a few years later, the situation changed during the divorce proceedings between April Ashley, a transgender woman, and her husband. In this case, the court issued a ruling based on biological characteristics, denying April Ashley legal recognition as a woman. This decision highlighted a narrow and reductionist view of gender, which, unfortunately, still persists in legal practice. The decision, based on biological characteristics, ignored the importance of self-identification and psychological sex, highlighting the controversy and complexity of issues related to gender identity (Playdon, 2021). Thus, these early medical and legal debates on gender not only paved the way for understanding gender identity as a more complex concept than a mere biological category, but also raised important questions about human rights, self-identification and legal recognition. They demonstrated how the legal system can interact with evolving understandings of gender and how important it is to adapt legal practice to new social and medical realities.

The distinction between sex and gender is gradually becoming more widely accepted and legitimised, particularly in Western cultures. In 1987, C. West & D.H. Zimmerman (1987) proposed the concept of “gender construction”, which encompasses a set of socially mediated perceptions, interactions and micro-political actions that interpret certain behaviours as manifestations of “natural” masculinity or femininity. According to the researchers, gender is a socially constructed category that emerges through interaction, involving the performance and social regulation of sex. In subsequent works, they emphasised that the understanding of gender performance largely occurs through identification with a particular sex category. Distinguishing between the categories of sex and gender, they noted that sex is determined by socially recognised biological differences, which are usually established at birth. In contrast, gender classification is used as a “substitute” for sex and is a socially constructed representation and indicator of sex, which must be perceived as self-declared. That is, the gender category requires corresponding actions and performance, which include external attributes and behaviour.

Regarding the limitations associated with a focus exclusively on gender performance, B. Hanckel & A. Shepherd (2024) argue that the concept of “doing gender” has been conceptually useful for understanding gender conformity and its reproduction in social interactions. However, this concept has its limitations, particularly in its ability to account for social change. According to Deutsch, “doing” is an excellent term that emphasises the constant creation of gender in everyday social interactions. However, if “doing” implies something completed or achieved, then “doing gender” may be more closely associated with the attainment and consolidation of gender difference rather than its deconstruction. This raises the question of whether the concept of “doing gender” can fully capture the dynamics of change in the realm of gender. A limitation of this concept is that it may fail to account for how gender norms and roles change in the context of social and cultural transformations. For a more complete understanding of how gender may evolve and how the transformation of gender identities may occur, it is necessary to explore not only the processes that define gender, but also the influences that may contribute to its rethinking and adaptation. Such a

broader understanding can help to better comprehend how social changes influence gender norms and roles in contemporary society (Afonina & Karpov, 2023).

In the field of gender studies, some scholars focus on the category of gender, emphasising that the ways in which it is constructed reveal possibilities or impossibilities within everyday social spaces. The works of A.L. Few-Demo & K.R. Allen (2020) and K.M. Keyes & J.M. Platt (2024) are significant in this context, as they propose a conceptual model of gender as a social structure that highlights and accounts for the influence of the category of sex on opportunities or limitations through various levels of social processes. According to the authors, the gender structure determines privileges and constraints based on gender category, which has an impact at three levels: at the personal level, shaping gender identity; at the level of interaction, where men and women encounter different social perceptions, even if they occupy the same structural positions; and in organisational spheres, where both cultural norms and the rules governing the distribution of resources and material goods differ along gender lines.

As described in the study by C. Mazzuca *et al.* (2020), the current distinction between sex and gender essentially lies in the difference between describing people according to a concept grounded in the biological sciences and describing them according to an approach based on the social sciences. This suggests that sex is more closely linked to the anatomical and natural characteristics of the naked body. Gender is more closely related to the social aspects of physical appearance: the clothes worn, the actions performed by the body, and how that body is addressed by peers. Furthermore, “non-binary” genders, or gender expressions that do not conform to traditionally defined male and female roles, humanise people in contemporary culture, but also become the basis for punishing those who do not fit within these traditional boundaries. This “punishment” is most commonly applied to those who identify on the trans spectrum, as trans people often express their gender in ways that exist between traditional gender sanctions and the roles established for non-transgender people (Erikson-Schroth, 2022).

The idea that gender representation is a performance was developed by Judith Butler in her key works, particularly in “Gender Trouble”. She argues that gender is not a stable identity determined biologically, but rather the result of social and cultural performances that are constantly reproduced through specific actions and behaviours. According to this theory, gender-related actions, such as clothing choices, body language, manners and other external manifestations, are examples of how individuals perform or “do” their gender (Rafique & Mukhtar, 2019). These acts are not only individual but also a social practice carried out within a specific cultural and historical context. J. Butler and other researchers, such as L. Erikson-Schroth (2022), explain that these gender acts, although regular and seemingly stable, do not mean that individuals can constantly change their gender solely through these performances. Gender acts are performed within the framework of a pre-existing identity and often occur subconsciously as part of social construction. This means that individuals interact with gender norms and expectations that are already defined within their social context. It is important to note

that gender performance theory does not claim that one can change one's gender indefinitely through these acts. Instead, it emphasises that gender is a dynamic and complex social construct that is constantly reproduced through everyday activities, interactions and cultural practices. This allows for a better understanding of how personal and social conceptions of gender are formed and maintained in society, as well as how these conceptions can be subject to change and reinterpretation.

Gender and gender representation are complex and multifaceted concepts that go beyond biological definitions of sex. As research shows, gender is not a fixed characteristic, but a socially constructed identity that is shaped through interaction, cultural expectations and institutional norms. The concept of "doing gender" emphasises that gender identity is reproduced through daily practices and behaviours that are perceived and regulated by society. Gender representation, in turn, encompasses the external manifestations of gender, such as clothing, body language and other socially significant actions that signal belonging to a particular gender. It is important to recognise that these representations are neither natural nor immutable. Representations of gender depend on cultural and historical contexts and may change over time. Thus, gender and its representation are dynamic processes that are constantly evolving and require re-examination in contemporary society.

THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER IN PAINTING: CURRENT TRENDS

In traditional art, the depiction of gender roles often reflected the social norms and constraints prevalent during specific historical periods. In Ancient Egypt, art played an important role in both religious and secular aspects of life. It served not only a decorative function but also had deep symbolic meaning, particularly in the context of depicting social and religious roles. Women were an important part of this visual narrative and were depicted in various social roles. For example, they were portrayed as dancers, musicians and mourners during ritual funeral processions. These depictions held symbolic significance and highlighted the importance of women in religious rites and public life. In tomb paintings and reliefs from the ancient period, women are often depicted in scenes of everyday life – working in the fields or preparing food. These scenes not only recorded daily activities but also reflected the importance of women in ensuring the stability of family and economic life (Adeloye *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, the art of that period depicted not only women from lower social classes but also those of high social status. For example, female pharaohs, such as Hatshepsut, were depicted in monumental works, testifying to their political and religious significance. Hatshepsut, one of the most famous female rulers of Ancient Egypt, was depicted in works of art with attributes traditionally associated with men. This was a symbol of her political power and legitimacy as a pharaoh. By the end of her reign, attributes such as the false beard and the royal kilt had become an integral part of her image, symbolising her equality with men in governance (Šehović, 2022). Such depictions emphasise that women could hold the highest positions in Egyptian society and use art as a tool to strengthen their political status. As for Ancient Greece, the patriarchal structure of

society had a significant influence on the representation of women in art. Although women were restricted in their political and social rights, they were often depicted in the context of domestic and private life, which was considered their primary sphere of activity. On vases and other works of art, women were depicted at weddings, in domestic scenes, or in funeral processions, reflecting cultural ideals of femininity and their duties in society. Women were depicted in the context of specific rituals and ceremonies, emphasising their symbolic role in maintaining social order.

However, it is important to note that these depictions were created predominantly by men and reflected male perceptions of women's roles within society. Artistic works of the fifth century BCE, such as scenes from Euripides' "The Trojan Women" or Aristophanes' "Lysistrata", frequently employed female figures in order to critique or emphasise particular social themes. Such representations generally served as a means of expressing male perspectives on women's roles in society rather than depicting the actual circumstances of women's lives (Bennett, 2019). This indicates that the representation of women in Ancient Greek art possessed a symbolic character and was more closely connected with social expectations regarding women than with reality itself. The Renaissance and Baroque periods provide further vivid examples of how artists depicted men and women in accordance with dominant social conceptions of gender. Women were often portrayed as passive, delicate, and confined to domestic responsibilities, while their roles in art corresponded to idealised notions of femininity and virtue. At the same time, men in art were represented as powerful, decisive, and frequently heroic figures participating in scenes of triumph and achievement (Puff, 2020). Such depictions supported and legitimised the rigid gender roles characteristic of these historical periods and reinforced the social norms of the time.

However, the history of art has seen no shortage of movements that challenged existing gender norms. One such movement was the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in the 1850s. The Pre-Raphaelites aimed to portray women with an emphasis on their intellectual and emotional depth, dispelling the romanticised and static stereotypes that prevailed in the art of that period (Sayın, 2020). This movement portrayed women as active and independent individuals, seeking to provide a more nuanced perspective on the role played by women in society. Many of their artworks depicted women very differently from the classical tradition. The so-called "beauties" in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's paintings were slender, delicate figures (in contrast to the rounded, sexualised nude women, such as in Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus"). They were often depicted in scenes of suffering, fainting, illness or on the brink of death, with pale skin and appearing helpless (Carman, 2019; Barcelos, 2024).

In the past century, feminist art movements have made a significant contribution to the critique of the male gaze and the objectification of women in art. L. Nochlin's (1971) famous essay on the factors behind the absence of women in the visual arts challenged the systemic barriers women faced in the art world and identified cultural and institutional factors that explain why women were less likely to achieve recognition in this field. Feminist artists such as Judith Sharp, Mary Cassatt, and Greta Montgomery called

for broader gender representation in art and emphasised the need to develop a more inclusive artistic narrative. Despite the efforts of feminist artists to change perceptions of gender in art, they have faced numerous challenges. Gender discrimination remains a significant issue, and the representation of the female form in art is often linked to prevailing understandings of the meaning of male and female identity. Historically, women have always been the subject of artistic depiction in art, and their depictions have often been nude. J. Berger (2008) argued in his work that nudity often means being an object for others, rather than simply being oneself. This observation confirms that many works of art depict women as objects rather than active participants. The term “gender discrimination against the female body” helps to explain why so many works of art throughout history have portrayed women as objects from a male perspective. Correspondingly, representations of “man as object” in the same sense are encountered far less frequently.

However, certain transformations in the representation of the female body can be observed in contemporary art. For example, É. Manet’s “Olympia” is a significant protest against traditional notions of nudity. By depicting a woman in a pose that rejects traditional notions of female modesty, Manet introduces a new perspective on how women are represented in art. As Berger noted, “when comparing Manet’s Olympia with Titian, one notices that the woman rejects her traditional place with a certain rebellion” (Berger, 2008). Contemporary art has introduced numerous new voices and approaches to the representation of gender. One such artist is T. de Lempicka, who in her 1929 work depicts a woman as the equal of a man in society, strong and free (Fig. 1). This painting became a symbol of the feminist movement in the 1970s, marking a new era in the representation of women in art (Akdemir, 2017).



Figure 1. Tamara de Lempicka, Self-Portrait in a Green Bugatti

Source: Google Photo

In 1989, the “Guerrilla Girls” movement initiated a detailed discussion concerning the representation of women in art by using a poster that questioned whether women needed to be naked in order to be represented in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This movement drew attention to gender-based bias in art, highlighting the number of female artists who failed to receive recognition, as well as

the manner in which women were depicted as nude objects. Founded in 1984, the “Guerrilla Girls” movement focuses its efforts on criticising and exposing manifestations of sexual and racial discrimination within the sphere of art, particularly in New York. The movement employs artistic and activist strategies to reveal inequalities in the representation of women and ethnic minorities in museum and gallery exhibitions. Many years after the organisation’s emergence, the “Guerrilla Girls” continue to engage in active work aimed at promoting change within cultural institutions and raising public awareness regarding issues of gender and racial inequality (Akdemir, 2017). Contemporary visual art demonstrates diverse approaches to the representation of gender. Art historians and artists frequently regard gender identity as fluid and multifaceted, thereby erasing traditional distinctions between masculinity and femininity. One such contemporary artist is Jenny Saville, a British painter known for her works that explore the human body and represent women in a new light. Her paintings address themes of identity, sexuality, vulnerability, and perceptions of beauty.

In the paintings of J. Saville, one can observe a deconstruction of traditional perceptions of the female body, where each work serves as a profound exploration of gender, corporeality, and identity. Her paintings create a sense of intensity and physical presence that challenges conventional standards of beauty (Meagher, 2023). For example, in the work “Propped” (1992), J. Saville depicts a nude female figure seated on a chair, characterised by coarse and powerful features that sharply contrast with traditional, idealised representations of feminine beauty (Fig. 2). Marks left by weight and pressure are visible on her thighs, emphasising the material reality of the body and the rejection of idealised forms.

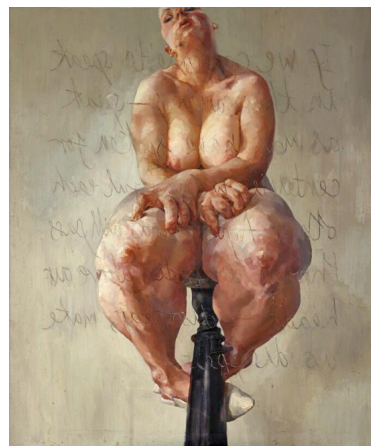


Figure 2. Jenny Saville, Propped

Source: Google Photo

In the painting “Plan” (1993), J. Saville explores the theme of corporeality through the image of a woman whose body is marked with surgical lines symbolising plastic surgery and the societal imposition of beauty ideals (Fig. 3). This raises questions concerning control over the body and the social pressure that compels women to alter their appearance in order to conform to established standards of beauty (Meagher, 2003).



Figure 3. Jenny Saville, Plan

Source: Google Photo

Another significant work, *Branded* (1992), depicts a distorted, excessively enlarged female body with the words “decorative”, “supportive”, and “delicate” inscribed upon the skin (Fig. 4). This work reflects the internal conflict of identity and societal perception, emphasising the ways in which women are objectified and judged solely on the basis of their appearance (Meagher, 2003).



Figure 4. Jenny Saville, Branded

Source: Google Photo

The paintings of J. Saville dismantle traditional perceptions of the female body by emphasising the realities of corporeality and gender identity. Her works reject socially constructed notions of beauty and reflect the internal experiences associated with bodily existence and self-perception, challenging viewers to reconsider their understanding of the female body and beauty (Meagher, 2003). The works of British artist S. Brown also fall into the category of art that deconstructs gendered notions. Brown is often discussed in the context of feminist art. Unlike earlier feminist artists, who actively questioned the canon that traditionally presented “male” art as a model of performative masculinity in the creation of large-scale works, S. Brown consistently asserts her own artistic authority. Although her works may be partly interpreted as feminist, what is most significant is that Brown considers her overall approach to art to be explicitly feminist (Gatt, 2022). In her works, S. Brown uses various elements to deconstruct gender

representation. In particular, the artist often depicts rabbits as substitutes for humans, which, alongside Flanagan’s works, evokes associations with the illustrations from “Peter Rabbit” by Beatrix Potter, as well as with the adult magazine “Playboy” or Hugh Hefner’s fantasy of “Playboy” bunnies. Historically, these cute little rabbits are known for their reputation for prolific breeding. They are used in Brown’s art not only to explore themes of sexuality, but also to deconstruct stereotypical notions of gender roles.

Brown skilfully uses rabbits as a metaphor for duality – innocence and eroticism. Her works, on the one hand, emphasise the softness and childlike associations with rabbits, but, on the other hand, introduce themes of sexual objectification and exploitation. Brown rejects the traditional portrayal of women as objects and explores how society imposes these stereotypes through popular symbols. In this way, she challenges stereotypes regarding femininity and the role of women in culture, using rabbits as a kind of mask to examine the complex interplay between sexuality, gender and power. Her works invite viewers to actively rethink their own attitudes towards traditional gender symbols and their role in public discourse (Gatt, 2022). In a cultural context, S. Brown’s work “Untitled” could easily borrow the arrangement of her rabbits and the colour scheme from Gauguin’s painting “Still Life with Three Puppies”, 1888 (Fig. 5). Her numerous rabbits, which occupy a central position in Figures 5 and 6, and the representation of crowds, distinguish the sexuality of the depicted creatures from de Kooning’s individual female forms. The use of crowds in S. Brown’s work demonstrates her approach to deconstructing traditional gender roles, where sexuality does not remain confined to the individual image of a woman; it extends to group dynamics (Gatt, 2022).



Figure 5. Cecily Brown, Untitled

Source: Google Photo

The depiction of crowds is a characteristic feature of traditional historical painting, where the composition is determined not by flat forms on the surface of the painting, but by the arrangement of human figures, which thus create a narrative within the pictorial space, as in Alberti’s Italian “history” (istoria) painting. In the spirit of “istoria” painting, which emerged in 15th-century Italy, such narrative paintings combine “a mixture of old people, young people, girls, women, youths, boys, birds, small dogs,

horses, sheep, buildings, landscapes and the like” and create an effect of intellectual elevation.

Thus, in the case of S. Brown, even if the story seems obscure or predominantly focused on the general themes of sex and violence, these elements can be seen in her painting “Untitled”, 1997 (Fig. 6), which evokes associations with the nightmares of F. Goya and scenes from the third panel of “The Garden of Earthly Delights” by H. Bosch. The motif of the rabbit has been used throughout art history, particularly in the works of H. Bosch, A. Dürer, E.H. Landseer, J. Beuys and J. Miró (Gatt, 2022).



Figure 6. Cecily Brown, *Untitled*

Source: Google Photo

An anachronistic element in Brown’s work is her connection to the tradition of the Old Masters. Her paintings employ unusual colour harmonies reminiscent of Watteau, particularly his orgiastic scenes of the Kermesse (possibly those held in the Wallace Collection in London, among others). Part of the experience of engaging with Brown’s paintings lies in recognising her knowledge of art history, which in turn reinforces her position within that very tradition (Gatt, 2022). Thus, contemporary art offers new perspectives on gender roles and the challenges faced by women, while simultaneously expanding the understanding of gender and culture. Such art not only reflects but also shapes new social norms, demonstrating the growing importance of diversity and equality in creative expression.

TRENDS IN THE REPRESENTATION OF GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Contemporary photography occupies a decisive and central position within modern culture. The majority of events of various kinds occurring across different countries are communicated to people through newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and television, and photographs undoubtedly exert significant influence across all these forms of mass media. In particular, much of an Iranian teenager’s perception and understanding of the Vietnam War is constructed through the images he or she has encountered relating to that event (Sattari & Mousavi, 2013). Since photography is commonly regarded by ordinary people as highly convincing and seemingly reliable, while also being mistakenly perceived as innocent and impartial, its effectiveness and influence continue to increase. As D. Bate (2016) notes,

photographs may create the illusion of transparent access to “reality” as the true language of photography. It is therefore unsurprising that photography has been described as the “eyes of modernity”, without which the contemporary world could scarcely exist. Over the past twenty years, with the spread of digital photography and mobile phones, a wider range of people than ever before has documented everyday events, street life, travel, and tragic incidents, and some of these photographs have gained considerable significance (Sattari & Mousavi, 2013).

The representation of the female figure in photography has been the subject of numerous academic studies. For example, N. Akdemir (2017) examined the work of female photographers and the representation of the female figure in contemporary visual art. The researcher identified several themes that female artists use in their photographs to reflect gender identity. The first theme, reflected in most contemporary photographs, is a critique of existing roles and representations of women through art. Notable figures include S. Sherman, a renowned American photographer and artist who skilfully depicts familiar female archetypes across different time periods in the world of photography and was recognised as one of the most influential artists of the last century (Chen, 2023). S. Sherman created the “Untitled Film Still” series – more than 60 black-and-white photographs taken in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These photographs, depicting Sherman in the roles of various female characters, explore the cultural stereotypes imposed on women through cinema, television and the media. The images resemble film stills, showing women in various situations – from domestic life to public roles. Due to the small format of the photographs (8 by 10 inches), the viewer has the opportunity to examine each image in greater detail, paying attention to the nuances of composition, facial expressions and the finer details of the costumes, allowing to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of the scene. Through these works, Sherman not only explores but also challenges conventional social notions of femininity, creating complex, multi-dimensional images that provoke the viewer to critically rethink the roles of women in culture.

Furthermore, “Untitled Film Still” also reflects ideas of self-determination and self-assertion. Sherman uses her own body and imagery to challenge traditional notions of female sexuality and social roles. Through these photographs, she questions authorship and the influence of the media on the perception of women. In turn, this prompts viewers to ask to what extent the images they see in the media shape their own perceptions of femininity and how these perceptions can be changed or challenged. Through her work, S. Sherman poses questions to society about the boundaries of identity and the challenges facing contemporary women in the context of global cultural and social transformation. In the “Untitled Film Still” series of photographs, the artist portrays various stereotypical film characters typically played by women, such as the ingenue, the working-class girl, the seductress and the single woman (Fig. 7). Sherman creates her works to resemble scenes from mid-20th-century Hollywood, film noir, B-movies and arthouse films. Her graphic works replicate the style, proportions and clarity of frames typically used in advertising materials. In this way, Sherman includes herself in these images, engaging in a conversation about stereotypical

perceptions of women. Each photograph looks like a scene from a Hollywood melodrama, whilst the real woman remains off-screen and is not idealised. In these photographs, S. Sherman not only criticises the factors that force women to conform to certain stereotypes, but also attempts to change the perspective of men who perceive women solely as objects (Akdemir, 2017).



Figure 7. Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still

Source: Google Photo

S. Sherman employs a range of emotions in her works in order to express a critique of existing gender roles. One of the emotions the artist frequently utilises is discomfort. In several photographs from the “Untitled Film Still” series, S. Sherman adopts a feminist approach by portraying women in passive and vulnerable poses, carefully constructing the staging and composition to create a sense of anxiety. In “Untitled No. 48”, she intensifies the vulnerability of the female figure by contrasting her form with the dense forest in the background, the overcast atmosphere, and the endless, mysterious road stretching ahead (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still No. 48

Source: Google Photo

Similarly, in “Untitled No. 51” (Fig. 9), the woman is depicted within a spatial zone shaped like a triangle, formed by the staircase, the roof, and the wall. The woman is confined within two narrow frames: the triangular zone and the rectangular space of the painting itself. In contrast to the background, where objects are rendered on a miniature scale, viewers find it difficult to interpret the emotional state of the woman because her facial expression

remains unseen. The woman’s anxiety within the image is intensified through these two aspects, while the contrast of colours further amplifies the sense of unease that is characteristic of S. Sherman’s works (Chen, 2023).



Figure 9. Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Still No. 51

Source: Google Photo

S. Sherman’s views in this series of artworks may also be supplemented by the explanation that films possess a structure functioning along the passive/active axis, in which the man occupies the position of active perception, while the woman remains on the passive side as the one “to-be-looked-at”. This is achieved in two ways: through the representation of the male figure within the frame and through the camera itself, which presents the woman and directs the audience’s objectifying gaze. In simpler terms, the woman in films is intended to be looked at (Chen, 2023). Another theme present in contemporary photography is violence against women. The theme of violence is reflected in the work of Y. Ono, the Japanese-American artist and singer. In 1964, she presented the performance “Cut Piece” in Kyoto, which was documented through photography. In the images, the artist stands alone on stage dressed in an elegant suit, with a pair of scissors placed nearby. Audience members were invited to approach one by one and use the scissors to cut away small pieces of her clothing. Some individuals acted cautiously, cutting only small fragments from a sleeve or the hem of a skirt, whereas others cut away the front of her blouse or undergarments. Y. Ono remained motionless and displayed no emotion until the conclusion of the performance (Akdemir, 2017).

This performance constitutes a symbolic representation of women’s vulnerability and defencelessness in the face of violence within society. It also exposes the boundaries between personal space and public intrusion, demonstrating how women become objects of physical aggression or even mere public curiosity. In “Cut Piece”, Y. Ono literally places her body at the disposal of the audience, thereby questioning traditional social roles and the power exercised through violence or the exploitation of the female body. This performance remains relevant nowadays, serving as a reminder of the continuing violence against women and the ongoing struggle for rights and safety within contemporary society. Y. Morimura represents another example of an artist demonstrating a progressive perspective on the

representation of gender in photography. Y. Morimura is a Japanese artist renowned for his self-portraits in which he transforms himself into famous characters, particularly women from art history and popular culture. Through this practice, Y. Morimura challenges constructions of gender, race, and identity. One of the Japanese artist's notable works is based on Man Ray's black-and-white photograph from 1920 depicting Marcel Duchamp in the role of Rose Sélavy, which Morimura later reinterpreted as the colour photograph "Doublenage" (Marcel) (Fig. 10). Rose Sélavy was Duchamp's female alter ego, adopted in order to explore ideas of sexual identity. Although the creation of this work is attributed to Duchamp, it was he who originally created the persona of Rose Sélavy (Gorman, 2013).



Figure 10. Yasumasa Morimura, Doublenage (Marcel)
Source: Google Photo

Using photographic techniques from the late twentieth century, Y. Morimura transforms Marcel Duchamp's black-and-white photograph of Man Ray in the role of Rose Sélavy into a colour print. The result is an image that appears garish and strikes the viewer with its combination of bright colours and the contrast in skin tones, whereas Duchamp's image possesses a mysterious, seductive atmosphere. Perhaps the failure of this work to convince the viewer of its originality can be attributed to the medium of the original artwork rather than to Y. Morimura's failure. In his appropriation, he transforms a black-and-white photograph into a colour one, whereas he usually transforms an already colour painting into a colour photograph. From Duchamp's photograph (Marcel), he creates his own artwork by reproducing the photograph, a medium which, like the portrait, was primarily used to depict a person based on their individual characteristics (Gorman, 2013). Y. Morimura raises the question of how an artist can create a face or identity in art that can be illustrated through style or imagery without being subject to inconsistency. In his work "Doublenage", he continues to explore how artists can express and question female identity, using the "self" to create the illusion of one's own identity. Y. Morimura not only grapples with the difficulties of creating a personal identity through photography but also depicts this identity as a product of consumer culture. His artistic practices allow to rethink traditional notions of how photographs shape identity (Gorman, 2013).

Furthermore, Y. Morimura actively employs the technique of self-portraiture, which enables to explore and deconstruct stereotypes and cultural constructs associated

with gender identity. By transforming himself into famous cultural icons and female characters, he not only brings issues of cultural identity to the fore but also examines processes of self-determination in a globalised world. Y. Morimura reveals how identity can be a construct shaped by cultural, social and media factors, rather than merely the result of internal self-expression. This encourages viewers to reflect on how contemporary art can serve as a tool for revealing and critiquing social norms and expectations, whilst also prompting them to actively re-examine their own perceptions of identity and cultural imagery.

The theme of stereotypes is central to the representation of gender in contemporary visual art, particularly photography. Research has shown that stereotypes relating to different races, cultures or ethnic groups are persistent and do not change quickly. Gender stereotypes are also subject to social factors and cultural context. Society has certain norms regarding a man's appearance and a woman's behaviour. This perspective has also been represented by artists in contemporary visual art, as it creates a positive context for gender-related inquiries. The examples given above also represent prejudices. However, the other side of gender, which is largely determined by sexual identity, is often reflected in contemporary art through stereotypes. With new approaches and ideas, artists' stereotypes have begun to dissipate, particularly within the framework of queer theory. However, the works of M. Foucault influence postmodernist criticism and the activities of artist-activists (Akdemir, 2017).

Regarding queer theory, N. Akdemir (2017) notes that one of its principal sources is the first volume of Michel Foucault's "The History of Sexuality" (1976), in which he argues that although sodomy as a violation of social norms had existed for a long period, the concept of the "homosexual" as a distinct type of human identity was developed within medical and legal paradigms during the late nineteenth century. Continuing the development of constructionist theory, Judith Butler, in her work concerning gender challenges and feminism, presented sexual and gender categories as performative (Yaghoubi-Notash *et al.*, 2019). She argues that the traits culturally defined as masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual, are formed through processes of identification and identity development internalised by the socialised individual, as well as through the forms of behaviour that he or she adopts. According to Butler, every individual continuously performs a gender role, regardless of whether it is traditional or otherwise. Consequently, the issue lies not in whether one performs gender, but rather in which particular role is being enacted. By choosing to be different within this context, society may influence transformations in gender standards and the binary interpretation of masculinity and femininity. The idea of identity as a flexible and indeterminate phenomenon, not tied to any fixed "essence" but instead connected with performative activity, constitutes one of the central concepts of the queer approach to identity (Yaghoubi-Notash *et al.*, 2019).

If contemporary works of art are analysed, numerous examples of these ideas may be identified. In particular, the photographer D. Arbus captured scenes from the everyday lives of sex workers, transgender people, and other marginalised individuals who are usually excluded from

mainstream American society. One of her photographs depicting a young man wearing hair curlers reflects Arbus's interest in questions of gender roles and identity (Fig. 11). The young man photographed by D. Arbus gazes directly into the camera while wearing hair curlers, with shaved eyebrows and painted fingernails, yet simultaneously retaining a conventionally masculine appearance. This photographic portrait may be interpreted as a reconsideration of gender identities through its ambiguity and contradiction. The young man exists within the space between what society expects from his physical appearance and how he himself wishes to be perceived by others. Through this image, viewers are encouraged to reconsider diverse forms of identity and to question established assumptions and social conventions (Akdemir, 2017).



Figure 11. Diane Arbus, Young Man in Curlers

Source: Google Photo

It is important to recognise that issues relating to gender roles and the portrayal of women in photography are constantly evolving. Despite achievements such as the works of S. Sherman, Y. Ono and Y. Morimura, research shows that contemporary photography continues to reflect and explore complex issues of gender identity, power and consumption. Understanding this process enables a deeper comprehension of how photographs may shape and influence perceptions of the world.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study showed that artistic works from earlier periods also frequently reflected the stereotypes and constraints characteristic of specific eras. For example, during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, men were

typically depicted as heroic and powerful figures, whilst women often appeared as passive and delicate. This reinforced traditional gender roles and cemented them in the public consciousness. In the Middle Ages and the Modern Era, women were often depicted through archetypes, which emphasised stereotypical notions of their nature. It has been observed that contemporary artists use their art to reflect and express the experiences of people who identify as transgender and non-binary. They explore themes of self-determination and self-identification through various media, including drawing, sculpture and video art. Changes in the representation of gender are also becoming evident in new media; virtual reality, interactive art and digital platforms allow artists to experiment with gender identities and create new forms of self-expression. Art that explores and challenges traditional gender norms not only enriches the cultural context but also helps foster a society more oriented towards inclusion.

Thus, contemporary visual art plays a significant role in re-examining and rethinking gender roles. Although historical stereotypes and discrimination persist, contemporary artists and movements are making significant strides in deconstructing traditional notions and broadening the understanding of gender, creating new opportunities to express the diversity of gender identities and ensuring a fairer representation of all voices in the art world. These changes not only shape new artistic practices but also contribute to social progress, providing an opportunity for a deeper understanding and acceptance of gender diversity. Prospects for further research lie in a deeper examination of the influence of digital technologies and new media on the transformation of gender images in art. It would also be worthwhile to examine regional characteristics of the representation of gender identity and their influence on the formation of global artistic discourse.

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Гендер та його репрезентація в сучасному образотворчому мистецтві

Анотація. Метою дослідження було всебічне вивчення еволюції репрезентації гендеру в образотворчому мистецтві в історичній ретроспективі. Під час дослідження вивчалися творчі роботи мисткинь, таких як С. Шерман, Я. Морімура, Т. де Лемпіцької та Й. Оно, які ставили під сумнів традиційні уявлення про представниць жіночої статі у мистецтві і боролися з системними перешкодами. Особлива увага приділялася феміністичній критичній думці, представленій Л. Нохлін, яка проаналізувала структурні проблеми, що ускладнюють репрезентацію жінок у мистецтві. Надано оцінку того, як історичні та культурні контексти формували зображення чоловічих і жіночих ролей у різних епохах. Проаналізовано вплив класичних концепцій на створення гендерних архетипів, які протягом довгого часу домінували в мистецтві. Дослідження акцентувало увагу на феміністичних рухах і їхньому впливі на образотворче мистецтво, а також розглянуло сучасні тенденції в мистецтві, наприклад, вплив постмодернізму та критики гендерних стереотипів. Художники, такі як Дж. Севілл, активно досліджували нові форми вираження і самоідентифікації, що виходять за межі традиційних гендерних ролей. Стаття також висвітлила вплив глобалізації на сучасне мистецтво, що сприяє виникненню нових підходів у дослідженні гендерної ідентичності. Окремо було присвячено увагу соціальним та культурним наслідкам цієї еволюції, включаючи те, як сучасне мистецтво впливає на виникнення нових образів і перегляд суспільних стандартів. Вивчено, як художні практики можуть сприяти розширенню уявлень про гендер і впливати на суспільні дискурси. Практичне значення результатів полягає у поглибленні розуміння гендерної репрезентації в сучасному образотворчому мистецтві, що може бути використано для формування інклюзивнішої художньої освіти, розвитку критичного мислення в культурних студіях та підтримки мистецьких практик, які сприяють переосмисленню гендерних стереотипів.

Ключові слова: художник; техніка зображення; жінка; живопис; фотографія