

# INTERFACE

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# INTERFACE

*A point where two systems, subjects, organizations, etc., meet and interact.*

Oxford Dictionary

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**ART HISTORY**





# SAINT SEBASTIAN IN THE RENAISSANCE: THE CLASSICIZATION AND HOMOEROTICIZATION OF A SAINT

Rachel Wall

Between his initial appearance in Christian art during the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE to representations in the Baroque, the iconography of St. Sebastian underwent a significant transformation. The roles that he filled later in this period included devotional figure during the plagues beginning in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, a classicized nude throughout the Renaissance, and a homoerotic figure in Italian Baroque art. During the early Renaissance, artists aimed to emulate the classical Greek nude, but the conservative religious nature of most art at that time created a predicament. As one of the few religious male figures whose partial nudity was considered appropriate by Renaissance society, St. Sebastian was exploited by artists who desired to integrate classical art. In addition to the revitalization of Greek artistic canons, ancient

attitudes towards sexuality were also expressed through Renaissance art. Homoeroticism, and eroticism in general, became a reoccurring theme in Renaissance art, even in works of a religious nature.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the market demand for works in this sexualized style, St. Sebastian became a common homoerotic figure. Despite its prevalence during the Renaissance, the classicization and sexualization of Saint Sebastian would be criticized by many, most notably by the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation of the mid to late 16<sup>th</sup> century. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the iconography of St. Sebastian held little resemblance to his representation during the Medieval period. The purpose of this paper is to examine the circumstances under which it became possible for Saint Sebastian to be used as a homoerotic figure, including his historical artistic representations, contemporaneous homosexual practices in Italy, and an analysis of Guido Reni's many depictions of St. Sebastian.

Due to the controversial nature of this subject, it is important to understand the context through which this iconographical change occurs. According to Jacobus de Voragine, author of the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Legenda Aurea*, Sebastian was a Roman soldier during the reign of emperors Maximian and Diocletian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. When it was discovered that Sebastian was a Christian, Diocletian ordered him to be tied to a post and shot with arrows. Jacobus de Voragine claims that the soldiers "shot so many arrows into his body that he looked like a porcupine, and left him for dead."<sup>2</sup> Despite this brutality, Sebastian miraculously

survived, only to be beaten to death a short time later at Diocletian's command. In this account, there is no reason to assume St. Sebastian was at all nude during either violent episode. Images of St. Sebastian prior to the 14<sup>th</sup> century accord with the description of Sebastian given by Jacobus de Voragine. Typically, he is depicted wounded by a multitude of arrows, or shown in the garb of a Roman soldier as is fitting considering his military career. One such example is a 9<sup>th</sup> century fresco located in the Chiesa di San Giorgio al Velabro (fig. 1), depicting Sebastian as a military man holding a spear and reflecting his identification as a patron saint of soldiers. However, images of Sebastian would remain relatively uncommon until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and it is around this time that he became widely associated with protection of a different nature.

St. Sebastian had always been popular in Italy, and particularly in Rome, due to the fact that it was the place of his martyrdom.<sup>3</sup> According to the 8<sup>th</sup> century *Historia Longobardorum* by Paul the Deacon, in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, Rome and Pavia were struck by a deadly epidemic. In this account, relief came to the city of Rome after they constructed an altar dedicated to Saint Sebastian which held his remains.<sup>4</sup> This action was repeated in 1348 in Paris by Foulques de Chanac, the bishop of Paris, when the Black Death began to decimate the city. Relics of St. Sebastian were placed in the Abbey of St. Victor; subsequently, his association with the plague spread across Europe.<sup>5</sup> The claim has also been made that there is a deeper metaphor connecting St. Sebastian

with the plague. The argument is that there is a correlation between the pain he underwent during the first attempt on his life by Diocletian's soldiers and that which is suffered by those afflicted by the plague. Additionally, there is a biblical precedent in which arrows represent disease or punishment sent from the divine. For example, in Psalm 64:7, it is stated, "But God shall shoot at them with an arrow; suddenly shall they be wounded." Also, as Job is suffering from a God-sent affliction, he says, "For the arrows of the almighty are within me."<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the causes for St. Sebastian's new religious role, it is undeniable that the image of St. Sebastian became one of the primary devotional icons in relation to the plague during the Renaissance and that a standard iconography evolved to reflect this status.

Deviating from the earlier 9<sup>th</sup> century iconography of the saint, by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a typical representation of St. Sebastian would present him tied to a post with a varying number of arrows piercing his exposed body. One example of this new iconography is present in a triptych of *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian and Scenes from his Life* from 1370 (fig. 2), located in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence. In the center panel, Sebastian has a multitude of arrows protruding from his body, which is covered only by a loincloth and shows the blood flowing from his wounds. He has a full beard denoting his mature age, but otherwise, his facial features lack distinction. St. Sebastian's role as intercessor and protector of plague victims also becomes evident in Renaissance art, as in *St. Sebastian Interceding for the*

*Plague Stricken* by Lieferinx from 1497-1499 (fig. 3). In this painting, Lieferinx depicts an urban setting struck by plague with men of the Church praying from books and the people crying for help in streets lined with bodies in shrouds. St. Sebastian is kneeling on a cloud in the sky, and appears to be pleading before a heavenly figure, most likely Saint Peter, on behalf of the people of the city. While he is painted kneeling rather than tied to a post as had become customary, he is still shown mostly nude covered only with a loin-cloth, and pierced by arrows. The threat of plague in Europe continued for centuries, and consequently, St. Sebastian was assured a continued presence in religious art.

The Black Death of the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century occurred during an extended period of renewed interest in ancient Greco-Roman art and literature, the catalyst for the Italian Renaissance. There was particular interest surrounding the classical Greek nude, and artists became eager to imitate it. However, this proved problematic considering that a majority of art during the Renaissance was religious in nature. As a result of his association with the plague, and the emphasis placed upon his arrow wounds, St. Sebastian could be appropriately shown with his body exposed, covered only by a loincloth. Theological arguments existed which supported the appropriateness of a nude St. Sebastian. One such claim was that his nudity is compared to that of Christ, whose naked body showed humility before God and whose physical beauty acted as a reflection of his soul's holiness.<sup>7</sup> Utilizing the latter argument, artists were not

merely able to justify the nudity of St. Sebastian, but create an idealized figure whose beauty had a religious function. However, this trope was not uniformly agreed upon. In 1592, Pope Clement VIII began a campaign against the use of nudity in religious art, and images of St. Sebastian were among those he found most offensive.<sup>8</sup> It was thought that such works constituted profane art and lacked a true historical depiction of the suffering of the saint.

One well-documented case in which the classicization, and the emerging sexualization, of St. Sebastian became problematic was an altarpiece created by Fra Bartolomeo for the Convent of San Marco in Florence around 1514. According to Giorgio Vasari, a 16<sup>th</sup> century biographer of Italian artists,

He [Fra Bartolomeo] painted a picture of S. Sebastian, naked, very lifelike in coloring of the flesh, sweet in countenance, and likewise executed with corresponding beauty of person.... the friars found, through the confessional, women who had sinned at the sight of it, on account of the charm and melting beauty of the lifelike reality imparted to it by the genius of Fra Bartolommeo; for which reason they removed it from the church.<sup>9</sup>

The veracity of this anecdote may be disputed, but the fact that it was deemed plausible by Vasari's adherents implies that such an occurrence was possible. The current location of the painting is unknown,



Fig. 1 Giovanni del Biondo, *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian and Scenes from his Life*, 1370, Museo dell' Opera del Duomo, Florence.

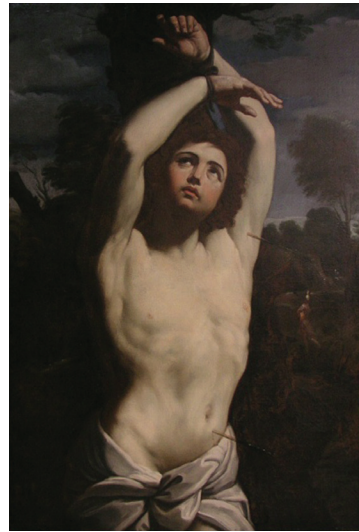


Fig. 3 Guido Reni, *St. Sebastian*, 1615, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. Photography by Erik Gould. Courtesy of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence.

Fig. 2 Zacchia il Vecchio (after Fra Bartolomeo), *St. Sebastian*, 1520, San Francisco, Fiesole.



Fig. 4 Guido Reni, *St. Sebastian*, 1640-42, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.



but in addition to written accounts about the piece, there is a copy of Fra Bartolomeo's painting located in nearby Fiesole (fig. 4).<sup>10</sup>

Many factors may have led to the removal of the altarpiece. In painting *St. Sebastian*, Fra Bartolomeo took unprecedented steps. In addition to the naturalism of the body, including the figure's lifelike size, the loincloth covering him was minimal and diaphanous. Also, St. Sebastian is in motion, stepping out of his niche rather than fettered to a post.<sup>11</sup> The latter point is particularly important because in St. Sebastian's pose, Bartolomeo intentionally emulates a Florentine sculpture by Jacopo Sansovino from 1512 of a nude Bacchus, the notorious Greek god of wine and festivities. If realized, the connection would most likely have contributed to the decision to remove the painting from San Marco.<sup>12</sup> Fra Bartolomeo created a Christian saint out of Bacchus, a pagan god, in order to demonstrate his skill and emulate the classical Greek nude.

Whatever the reason for the removal of Fra Bartolomeo's painting from San Marco, it demonstrates the attempt of religious authority to censor St. Sebastian's emerging role as a classicized and sexualized figure. However, traditional patronage practices were changing as the Renaissance progressed; artists began to exercise an increased amount of control over their work. In addition to patronage by the Catholic Church, patronage by elite ruling families and wealthy merchants was common in providing art for personal residences and secular

public spaces.<sup>13</sup> This meant that no longer did religious authority, alone, control what was considered appropriate in art, even when dealing with religious subject matter.<sup>14</sup> After an in-depth investigation into patronage during the Renaissance, art historian Martin Wackernagel came to the conclusion that there was an "increasing discrepancy between the artistic aims and the actual meaning and purpose of religious art."<sup>15</sup> The *St. Sebastian* by Fra Bartolomeo is indicative of the desire of the artist to create male nudes in the classical style. Vasari writes that "he [Fra Bartolomeo] had been accused many times of not knowing how to paint nudes; for which reason he resolved to put himself to the test...he painted a picture of S. Sebastian, naked...whereby he won infinite praise from the craftsmen"<sup>16</sup> There was resistance to this trend, as can be seen in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century rise of Savonarola in Florence, but such attempts were short-lived.<sup>17</sup> As a result, pagan mythology and erotic themes became increasingly prevalent in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy.

In addition to the revitalization of classical art in the Renaissance came the rediscovery of ancient literature and social practices. In ancient Greece, male sexuality often involved pederasty and sodomy, and this was reflected in the art, literature, and mythology of the time. Similarly, there is extensive evidence that homosexual practices flourished among male members of society in Italy beginning in the late Medieval period.<sup>18</sup> This predates the apparent Renaissance introduction to Greek homosexual practices, and so the latter cannot be considered to have



directly inspired late Medieval same-sex love. Yet this subculture of homoeroticism was likely later validated and normalized through its similarity to ancient practices, as well as its popularity in Greek mythology and literature. It was also reflected in the art of the time; eroticism, and specifically, homoeroticism, became increasingly common in Italian Renaissance art.<sup>19</sup> Religious art was not immune to this trend, and as a result, many saintly figures became sexualized.<sup>20</sup> Mary Magdalene was particularly subject to this sexualization because of her association with prostitution and physical beauty. As with St. Sebastian, at times, her nudity served a religious purpose as it forced the male voyeur to be inspired by her piety, instead of her sexual attraction.<sup>21</sup> At the time, Titian's *Penitent Magdalen* (1530) was praised by Vasari because "even though it is very beautiful, it moves not to lust, but to pity."<sup>22</sup> Vasari's statement implies that paintings of Mary Magdalene could potentially inspire lust, and in Titian's painting, it is easy to see why. She is an attractive young woman dressed only in her long hair, yet conveniently, her hair and her crossed arms fail to cover either of her breasts. It is evident that some members of the Catholic Church realized this issue and took aggressive aim at eliminating nude or semi-nude figures in religious art. The aforementioned campaign of Pope Clement VIII against what he considered indecent religious art is one such example. He cited nude images of Mary Magdalene, as well as the loinclothed St. Sebastian, as among the most offensive. His edict, *Per gli Altari e Pitture*, attempted to mandate the ways in which religious figures could be portrayed.<sup>23</sup> However, the

prevalence of homosexual practices and erotic art in the Renaissance made it impossible even for the Pope to eradicate them completely.

On April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1432, Florence established a specific investigative authority to enforce pre-existing laws against sodomy. This organization, The Officers of the Night, would continue to operate until 1502.<sup>24</sup> By studying records produced by this department, such as court cases, payment of fines, and individual accounts, historian Michael Rocke was able to form a general assessment of the nature of homosexual practices in Renaissance Florence. He found that in Florence, approximately half of men from all social classes were officially incriminated for sodomy at some point in their lives.<sup>25</sup> As in ancient Greece, these sexual relations often constituted pederasty in which a male over the age of 18 took the active, masculine sexual role. The passive "feminine" role was performed by a boy on average 11 years younger than his dominant partner; typically, the passive males were ages 12 to 18.<sup>26</sup> This sexual practice resulted in a high level of representation of young sexualized boys in art who would have been appealing to older male patrons. Saint Sebastian, in particular, but Ganymede and Cupid as well, became subjects onto which homoeroticism was often easily projected. Despite the establishment of The Officers of the Night, pederasty continued to constitute a social norm for many males in Florence, and punishment was either light or nonexistent.<sup>27</sup> According to Rocke, while Florence received a reputation for same-sex sodomy in the Renaissance, it was hardly the only society in

which this was prevalent. Venice,<sup>28</sup> Valencia, Volterra and many others had similar social practices, despite consistent condemnation by the Catholic Church.<sup>29</sup>

Renaissance artists and intellectuals clearly saw a parallel between the sexual norms of their own society and Greco-Roman views on sexuality. Mythology heavily imbued with sexual ambiguity in the behaviors of Zeus, Ganymede, and Hyacinth were commonly represented in Renaissance art.<sup>30</sup> Images of Ganymede were often created with homoerotic intent, as can be seen in works by Parmigianino, Correggio, Michelangelo, and Cellini. According to Greek mythology, Ganymede was a beautiful Trojan youth abducted by Zeus who, in the form of an eagle, brought Ganymede to Mount Olympus to be the cup-bearer to the gods and also Zeus's lover. Through Ganymede, artists were able to present a sexualized figure of youthful androgyny. The popularity of boyish figures such as Ganymede corresponded with a prevalence of pederasty in society.<sup>31</sup>

Benvenuto Cellini was in the employ of Cosimo di Medici in 1545 when he began to work on a sculpture of *Ganymede and the Eagle*. Cosimo had acquired a broken marble torso of classical origins, and Cellini suggested that by adding limbs, a head, and an eagle, he could "christen it Ganymede."<sup>32</sup> Following the myth, Cellini sculpted a beautiful nude youth with an idealized yet adolescent body and musculature. In this sculpture, however, Ganymede seems to play a role in his own seduction. The eagle is half the size of Ganymede, removing the sense

of domination and force inherent in a great number of Renaissance representations of Ganymede and Zeus. Additionally, Cellini's Ganymede tenderly caresses the feathers on the eagle's neck and playfully teases the eagle with a bird clutched in his raised hand.<sup>33</sup> In this instance, the homoerotic nature of *Ganymede and the Eagle* was clearly intended by Cellini, and homoeroticism became a theme in many of his other sculptural pieces.<sup>34</sup> Cellini's own homosexual predilections were well-known, and he subsequently faced persecution by the judicial courts of Florence.<sup>35</sup> The social and religious condemnation of erotic, including homoerotic, practices and art was magnified during the Counter-Reformation. The Council of Trent, convened in 1545 and lasting until 1563, placed greater restrictions on permissible subject matter in art, as well as artistic style, and there was a particular condemnation of pagan and sexual themes.<sup>36</sup> Ganymede was an example of both, and as a result, his popularity in Italian art declined.<sup>37</sup> As time passed, however, figures like St. Sebastian, St. John the Baptist, and Susanna were increasingly employed in erotic art since pagan themes had become impermissible.<sup>38</sup>

The disapproval of the Counter-Reformation Catholic church was not sufficient to eradicate erotic and homoerotic themes in art completely. Renaissance thinkers and artists continued to create homoerotic art from pagan myths, and also religious subjects within their own societal context. It is apparent in Vasari's account of Fra Bartolomeo's *St. Sebastian* that this religious saint was capable of

inciting lust. While Vasari refers only to female attraction to the saint, male sexual response would be plausible as well, especially given the prevalence of homosexual practices in Florence at this time as proposed by Rocke. However, it is later, primarily in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that the portrayal of St. Sebastian transitioned from a generically sexualized figure to a specifically homoerotic one. This is not to say that all artistic representations of St. Sebastian from this time period can be termed homoerotic, but it is clear that the demand for St. Sebastians painted in a homoerotic trope grew. The homoerotic potential of Saint Sebastian would be realized by numerous artists in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, including Carlo Saraceni, Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, and Guido Reni. The latter, in particular, utilized St. Sebastian to create homoerotic art, and painted the saint approximately nine times from 1610-1642. While there has been debate over the attribution of all of these paintings to Reni, his workshop, or his followers, their homoerotic implications are consistent. These nine paintings fall into three compositional groups, each of which emphasizes the youthful beauty of Saint Sebastian, rather than religious devotion or suffering.

Guido Reni was born in 1575 in Bologna, where he became an apprentice to artist Denis Calvaert at the age of nine. He later studied under Annibale Carracci and spent a significant part of his career in Rome. Many details of Reni's personal and professional life are known from the book *Felsina Pittrice, vite de' pittori bolognesi* published in 1678 by Bolognese art historian Carlo Cesare Malvasia, a

peer of Reni's.<sup>39</sup> Early in his career, Reni established himself as one of the foremost fresco painters in Rome.<sup>40</sup> Despite this success, in 1615 Reni returned to Bologna and began to work almost exclusively on canvas. Throughout his career, Reni's artistic style evolved and, alternately, contained elements of mannerism, the Caravaggesque, and naturalism. One of the most renowned and constant elements of Reni's art is the grace and nobility with which he imbues his subjects, a quality which is apparent in many of his paintings of St. Sebastian. His paintings so well captured the beauty and grace of his subjects that Malvasia once queried, who, when viewing Reni's angels, "does not feel carried off into sweetest ecstasy."<sup>41</sup> It seems that Reni's contemporaries realized the potential of his paintings to evoke an emotional response in the viewer.

Historical documents have also provided insight into Reni's personal life and behaviors. According to his contemporaries, Reni was fearful of women and asexual to the extent that he rejected all personal relationships with women, with the exception of his mother.<sup>42</sup> This misogyny had implications on his artistic career; Malvasia wrote that when dealing with female models Reni, "always looked like marble when observing [them] with whom he never wanted to be shut up and left alone while drawing."<sup>43</sup> Despite this aversion to women, Reni himself was considered by his peers as androgynous, he even admitted to depicting himself as a beautiful woman in one of his murals.<sup>44</sup> Androgyny and transvestism cannot be immediately translated into homosexuality, but as dis-



tinguished Reni scholar Richard Spear notes, Reni's disposition towards androgyny and sexuality are manifested in the way he eroticized some of his male and female subjects.<sup>45</sup>

The *St. Sebastian* by Reni in the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, painted around 1615, demonstrates the intent of the artist to create a work of art with homoerotic characteristics. As with previous images of Ganymede, Reni's painting reflects the homosexual practice of pederasty by presenting the viewer with a youthful and semi-androgynous beauty. This image would be appreciated by older male *voyeurs* of the painting, but possibly women, as well. The positioning of St. Sebastian's arms tied above his head place the body on display, and even though his torso is idealized and more mature than the face, it is not an example of exaggerated masculine musculature as found in many classicized nudes; it retains a youthful quality. There are two arrows visibly protruding from his body, but they are placed so that they do not detract from its perfection, virtually blending into the darkened background. The few drops of blood that these arrows produce are also easily overlooked in anything but a close examination. When compared to Reni's *St. Sebastian* at the Pinoteca Capitolina (1615), Rome, and in Palazzo Rosso (1615-1616), Genoa, they appear almost identical in composition. However, the *St. Sebastian* at RISD has a much darker background and landscape, in contrast to the illuminating light covering St. Sebastian's body, especially the torso, which glows with light. The *St. Sebastian* of Rome dem-

onstrates a narrative element: in the background of both paintings, a retinue of soldiers and horses can be seen retreating from the saint, and the arrows with which they tried to kill him are clearly visible on the saint's torso. Only one of these figures is easily discernable in the *St. Sebastian* at RISD, while the others are obscured by the darkness of the background. It is unlikely that this comparative darkness is due to the application of a varnish or lack of cleaning considering that the canvas is not uniformly darkened.<sup>46</sup> The isolation of the figure emphasizes the hegemony of the body, and hence, its sexual appeal, instead of the religious narrative. One of the most prominent features about the RISD Saint Sebastian is its size. Even though he is shown in a three quarter view, the body is scaled to life. This factor, along with the realism of the image, creates an intimate encounter between the viewer and the saint which is conducive to interpreting the painting in a sensual, if not sexual, manner.<sup>47</sup>

Reni would return to the figure of St. Sebastian years later in 1640, but this time, he departed from both the tenebrism and the realism demonstrated in his earlier paintings. Despite this change in style, many of the same homoerotic elements remain in Reni's *St. Sebastian* at the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna (1640-42). In this painting, there are no arrows to designate the identity of the adolescent; however, he is tied to tree and clothed with a scant loincloth as in Reni's other Sebastians and according to the trope. The youthful beauty of Reni's St. Sebastians, as well as man of his other religious subjects, is

the grazie with which he imbues his subjects. Despite the pain of his martyrdom, St. Sebastian realizes that his actions will bestow upon him God's love, and this causes bliss.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of the religious basis for this ecstasy, this factor could, in and of itself, create a sexualized figure.<sup>49</sup> Theoretically, at least, the youthful androgyny of Reni's St. Sebastians could serve the dual purpose of religious grace and a sexualized youth who could appeal to mature, male patrons.<sup>50</sup> Spear acknowledges that it is impossible to conclude decisively that Reni's work evoked sexual responses from 17<sup>th</sup> century viewers, but he believes that there is a clear homoerotic potential in some of Reni's male subjects, most notably those of St. Sebastian.<sup>51</sup>

Reni's own sexuality and its influence on his art is a matter of debate. It is possible that Reni participated in homosexual practices, but in the end, his homoerotic treatment of St. Sebastian cannot be wholly attributed to his personal sexual preferences. Despite the fact that artists at this time were beginning to have greater control over their work, they would not continue to work exclusively in a style for which there was no market demand. In many cases, economic motivations would have had far greater influences on style than the sexual preference of the artist. This is especially true in the case of Reni, who was renowned for his preoccupation with his finances and the way that his wages compared to those of his peers.<sup>52</sup> Unlike contemporary artists such as Annibale Carracci and Bernini, Reni did not set a price for the paintings he sold. Rather, he would force a potential buyer to make a price offer, which often ex-

ceeded the standard market price for similar paintings.<sup>53</sup>

It could be argued that Reni's homoerotic work was, in fact, a result of his own sexual preference and that patrons simply bought this work because they wanted a piece of the Reni brand. However, the prevalence of same-sex love during this time, the absence of a functional free art market in Italy, and other examples of a market demand for homoerotic work by other artists work against this claim. With regard to the latter, Parmigianino's *Cupid Carving his Bow* uses homoerotic elements similar to portrayals of St. Sebastian: Cupid is a full-length nude portrayed as a youthful, androgynous beauty. The knife positioned above his thigh is also thought to have a phallic allusion.<sup>54</sup> Like Reni's *St. Sebastian*, many copies were made of this painting, again demonstrating the market demand for homoerotic art.<sup>55</sup> Carlo Saraceni, in particular, did little to hide the homoerotic message of his paintings. In his *St. Sebastian* from 1610-1616, the saint has been removed from the customary post, and is reclining on red tapestry beside which is his discarded soldier's armor. The cloth covering the saint appears to be less of a loincloth than a strategically-placed sheet reminiscent of the bedroom. Similar to Reni's paintings, Saraceni presents a youthful nude with an idealized body. However, unlike Reni, the arrow is not hidden; rather, it is displayed prominently on the lower torso. St. Sebastian's head is thrown back in an ecstasy beyond the religious to the sexual. This combination of heavenly spirituality and earthly sexuality would

continue to permeate religious art throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* being a prominent example.<sup>56</sup> Similar to Saraceni's *Saint Sebastian*, Bernini's saint is reclined with a single arrow aimed at her lower abdomen, her head thrown back in ecstasy.

As a result of the homoerotic elements present in many artistic representations of Saint Sebastian during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, a modern cult of homosexuality surrounding St. Sebastian grew.<sup>57</sup> Yet, this does not mean that every image of St. Sebastian from this period is, by necessity, homoerotic. Artwork from this time which can be interpreted in this manner often shares similar elements which are conducive to its potential interpretation as homoerotic. In the art of Reni and his contemporaries, such indicators include the homosexual practices of the society in which they appeared, the androgyny of the figures, the youthful age of the figures, and the level of potential interaction between the sexualized figure and the male *voyeur*, be it the patron or the artist, both of whom were overwhelmingly male. The sexual practices of certain Italian regional societies at this time were conducive to many of these indicators and can be used to contextualize the high number of Italian artists in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century who produced homoerotic art. Additionally, the erotic nature of Greek art and literature acted as a legitimate outlet for expression of both heterosexual and homosexual desire. Even though not all male nudes in art were influenced by this eroticism, certainly, a great number were shaped by the Greek perception

of the ideal male nude. As a religious figure whose nudity was considered appropriate, St. Sebastian came to be commonly presented in both forms, and a particular conduit for male homosexual desire.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Andrea Bayer, et al, *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: 2008), 178.
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- 3 Otto Gecser, *Promoting the Saints* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2010), 262n.
- 4 Paul the Decon, *History of the Lombards*, trans. William Dudley Foulke (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), 255.
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- 6 Joseph P. Byrne, *The Black Death* (London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 94.
- 7 Beverly Louise Brown, *The Genius of Rome 1592-1623* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 281.
- 8 Ibid., 276.
- 9 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, (Florence, 1550), trans. Gaston du c. de Vere (New York: Random House, 1996), 676.
- 10 Janet Cox-Rearick, "Fra Bartolomeo's St. Mark Evangelist and St. Sebastian with an Angel," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 18 (1974): 348-349.
- 11 Ibid., 348-349.
- 12 Ibid., 350.
- 13 Martin Wackernagel, *The World of the Florentine Artists* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2011), 295.
- 14 Bram Kempers, *Painting Power and Patronage* (London: Penguin Press: 1992), 303.
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- 16 Vasari, *Lives*, 676.
- 17 Wackernagel, *The World of the Florentine Artist*, 293.
- 18 Bayer, *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, 183.
- 19 Ibid., 178.
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- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., 27.
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- 26 Ibid., 88.
- 27 Ibid., 15.
- 28 Ibid., 162.
- 29 Ibid., 133.
- 30 Bayer, *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, 181.
- 31 James M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1986), 77.
- 32 Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance*, 145.
- 33 In ancient Greece the gift of a bird was used to signify courting in a homosexual affair, *ibid.*, 148.
- 34 Ibid., 152-155.
- 35 Ibid., 150.
- 36 Ibid., 161.
- 37 Ibid., 162.
- 38 Brown, *The Genius of Rome*, 290.
- 39 Richard E. Spear, *The "Divine" Guido* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 12.
- 40 Ibid., 31.
- 41 Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice (1678)*, eds. G Zanotti et al. (Bologna, 1841), 15-16.
- 42 Spear, *The "Divine" Guido*, 51.
- 43 Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, 53.
- 44 Spear, 54.
- 45 Ibid., 60.
- 46 Email with RISD conservator, Ingrid Neuman. October 26, 2011.
- 47 Spear, *The "Divine" Guido*, 76.
- 48 Ibid., 127.
- 49 Ibid., 127.
- 50 A curious resemblance exists between the pose of the Cupid like character in Reni's painting of "Sacred and Profane Love" (1622) and another version of St. Sebastian by Reni located at the Prado (1617). In the former, Profane Love is shown tied to a post with his hands tied behind him, and his position is identical, though reversed, of the Prado St. Sebastian. Both figures are placed on the edge of the canvas with a similar, and distinct, skyline next to them. Perhaps the association of both Cupid and Sebastian with arrows can explain this similarity, but maybe it was also intended by Reni as a comment on the profane status of the homoerotic love which many images of St. Sebastian represented and encouraged.
- 51 Spear, *The "Divine" Guido*, 74.
- 52 Ibid., 211.

53 Ibid., 213.

54 Bayer, *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, 187.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 288.

57 Spear, *The "Divine" Guido*, 73.

# BOUQUET OF FLOWERS IN A VASE: VAN GOGH'S "UNEXPECTED" PAINTING

Catherine Restrepo

The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes Van Gogh's *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* (fig. 1) as a painting that has been a mystery for many scholars as to its place in Van Gogh's oeuvre. The wall label states, "it is the closest to the mixed bouquets of summer flowers that he produced in 'quantity' in Paris;" but at the same time, the label raises a contradiction by stating that this still-life has the 'quality' of the paintings Van Gogh produced in Saint-Remy and Auvers.<sup>1</sup> Two different periods in Van Gogh's life are seen in one painting. *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* is given little attention in primary sources and is different from his many other still-life paintings because the techniques employed in this painting are more commonly seen in Van Gogh's landscapes. As a result, the date of this work has been subject to con-

troversy. This thesis will situate the date of this painting securely in Van Gogh's oeuvre by using methods such as intensive formal analysis, biography, and natural science investigation.

Van Gogh loved to paint flowers. He wrote to his brother, Theo, "I for myself am contented, for better or for worse, to be a small gardener who loves his plants."<sup>2</sup> Flowers were easily accessible to Van Gogh, even when he could not afford models or was unable to paint outside. Specific flowers, such as sunflowers, roses, and lilies, frequently occur in his work and are intimately associated with his oeuvre. Flowers were also an ever-changing subject matter, since he would paint what was blooming in the season.<sup>3</sup> Flower painting provided the artist with mastery in skills of observation; this later helped in other works such as figure, landscape and portrait painting.<sup>4</sup>

Van Gogh was aware that there is a special art to painting flowers because they have subtle changes in hue and shade, which is of much significance for the overall painting. Van Gogh wanted to "harmonize brutal extremes," and he found painting flowers as a venue for doing many studies and achieving new ways to use intense color in his paintings.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout Van Gogh's life, he went from being influenced by other movements to eventually finding his own artistic style. This became one of the reasons why he was not accepted along with the Impressionist masters; Van Gogh felt he needed to achieve greatness with his own artistic style.<sup>6</sup> With

this in mind, however, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* cannot be placed among the works produced before the Paris period (1886): it relies on a familiarity with Impressionism and 19<sup>th</sup> century color theory and Van Gogh was not introduced to this until he moved to Paris.

The work is best described in terms of its color: first, there is the dark blue background that fades into the reddish brown table on which rests a bouquet in a vase surrounded at its base by a type of fern. The bouquet is mostly composed of white and yellow flowers. There is no clean yellow paint in the bouquet because it seems that it was painted over when the blue was just drying. The green sections in the bouquet are composed of a variety of greens; even bright, almost fluorescent greens can be seen. On the top of the bouquet, there are a couple of orange flowers and two buds of the same orange flowers on the opposite side. In the lower portion of the bouquet, three other flowers are arranged, one red and the two others pink.

The viewer is positioned just a little above the flowers, as if one were observing the bouquet standing near the table. There is a sense of balance because the brushstrokes of the table seem to cradle the vase that is positioned in the center of the canvas. The space given to the vase fills a majority of the area with a very densely arranged bouquet. The pace with which Van Gogh painted *Bouquet* seems to have been very rapid. This is seen in the aggressive application of paint and the way in which some

flowers look as if paint was applied before the background dried.

There is a subtle, but distinctive, use of complementary colors. The purpose of doing so would be to create the feeling that the colors in the painting are brighter than they are by themselves. The orange flowers on the top are a similar hue to the table, and consequently, give the illusion that the blue background is more intense than it is. The red and pink flowers are surrounded by the green fern, which also makes the red brighter. Lastly, Van Gogh used a small amount of light purple in the flowers that are placed around the yellow ones. Through these details, Van Gogh demonstrates his knowledge of the theory of complementary colors.

This is not to say that this work has no connection to earlier works. Even before the period in Paris, Van Gogh was impressed by Dutch and French artists and in particular, by their use of color and how they painted quickly. He believed it was a joy to paint in one burst and that it gave the paintings a spontaneous quality that Van Gogh wanted to achieve. In a letter to Theo, he suggested that everyone look at French and Dutch paintings because of their realism and their highly variegated color palette.<sup>7</sup> In *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, moreover, the position of the vase is at the center of the canvas, a traditional choice that rejects the then-current vogue for Japanese prints and asymmetrical composition. This positioning and densely populated bouquet was often seen in Dutch and French still-life paintings that

were an influence early in Van Gogh's life (fig. 2).<sup>8</sup>

In order to narrow down the date of the work more specifically, we can look profitably to Van Gogh's two final years in Saint-Remy and Auvers. In his final years, Van Gogh achieved what many believe to be the highest painting quality of his career. These periods synthesize every bit of influence that Van Gogh might have acquired throughout his life. One can see clearly in *Bouquet* the many techniques he learned and his mastery of color theory.

The period in Saint-Remy was dominated by Van Gogh's sickness: he opted to commit himself to the asylum there after mutilating himself. Van Gogh committed himself mostly to be isolated from the world, writing to his sister and brother that this would lead to a calmer psychological self. He wanted to be separated from the world because he believed that it might be the only way he could start feeling better. "I am unable to describe exactly what's wrong with me; now and then there are horrible fits of anxiety, apparently without a cause, or otherwise a feeling of emptiness and fatigue in the head."<sup>9</sup> He also longed to abandon his previous painting style that seemed to reflect his agitated state of mind. Van Gogh later described this period at Saint-Remy as a peaceful one where he was able to continue his works unself-consciously; the seclusion helped him focus on his psychological self rather than his art.<sup>10</sup>

After a year in Saint-Remy, Van Gogh's productivity during his time in Auvers (1890) was that of a canvas per day. Van Gogh befriended his psychia-

trist, Dr. Paul Gachet, during this period and it was because of him that he moved to Auvers. For some time, Van Gogh's paintings seemed much calmer and he had lost some characteristics of his style before his commitment directly related to the changes in his life. His paintings started to be dominated by flowers, something that meant security for him.<sup>11</sup> Before Saint-Remy, Van Gogh's paintings reflected his tortured psyche.<sup>12</sup> After some time, however, Van Gogh returned to the same style and especially, attempts at achieving grandiosity with color by intensifying its effects. Van Gogh loved the power of color: "In color seeking life the true drawing is modeling with color."<sup>13</sup> His paintings were quickly executed and much more intense, recapturing the anguish Van Gogh felt before Saint-Remy. He was, in part, re-adjusting from living in isolation for a year and returning in many ways to his old self. Auvers is where Van Gogh spent the rest of his days, from May until his suicide in July.<sup>14</sup>

The flowers in the vase of *Bouquet* play a role in determining that this still-life is not from the Auvers period. As mentioned earlier, the Metropolitan Museum describes the flowers as "the closest to the mixed bouquets of summer flowers,"<sup>15</sup> but the flowers have not been definitely identified. The white, orange and yellow flowers in the bouquet have been identified as chrysanthemums. These are fall flowers in the European climate. The scientific name for this type of chrysanthemum is "*hypochaeris radicata*" and it is similar to a dandelion, considered a widespread weed.<sup>16</sup> There are three other flowers in the bouquet that are not chrysanthemums; these are the red and





Fig. 1 Vincent van Gogh, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.  
Image: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY



Fig. 2 Eugene Delacroix, 149-1850. *Wildflower Bouquet*. Oil on Canvas. Musée des beaux-arts, France.  
Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 3 Vincent van Gogh, *Vase with Asters, Salvia and Other Flowers*, 1886. Oil on Canvas  
The Hague, Haags Gemeentemuseum.



Fig. 4 Vincent van Gogh, Wheatfield with Cypresses, 1889. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art. © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 5 Vincent van Gogh, Flowering Orchard, 1888. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY  
Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

pink flowers in the bottom of the bouquet. The pink flower is closest to a begonia, which grows in late spring to early fall. The red flower may be a poppy. Van Gogh was not a stranger to them: he used them for many still life paintings and they also grow in the fall. *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* could not have been produced in Auvers because Van Gogh was only there for the first half of the year and committed suicide before the fall season arrived.

It should be stated that after a close look at the *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, Dr. Hans den Nijs classified the flowers as asters instead of the common presumption of chrysanthemums.<sup>17</sup> Dr. Hans den Nijs is a professor at the University of Amsterdam, and has dedicated his life to classifying flowers from various still-life paintings by Van Gogh. He deduced that the flowers in *Bouquet* are Chinese asters. Through Louis Van Tilborgh, Senior Researcher at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Dr. Hans den Nijs discussed Chinese asters:

They have around the leaves with color also leaves with green, and in this case he presumed that although the color is not exactly green, but a little bit lighter, he thought also in connection with the other characteristics that in this case they must also be asters (sic).<sup>18</sup>

I cannot agree with this identification because in Van Gogh's oeuvre, asters have been depicted very few times and the way that they are painted appear dif-

ferently from the flowers in Bouquet. For example, in *Vase with Asters, Salvia and Other Flowers* (1886) (fig. 3), the sizes in which the asters are painted do not match the flowers in Bouquet. Also, Van Gogh seems to put more attention in the shift of colors in the center of each aster, while in Bouquet, the center of each flower is depicted as a small dot. At the same time, chrysanthemums have been painted before in a greater quantity than asters and they have striking similarities to the flowers painted in Bouquet.<sup>19</sup> For example, the chrysanthemums painted in *Bowl with Chrysanthemums* (1886) have similar brushstrokes to the flowers in Bouquet. *Bowl with Chrysanthemums* is, however, an earlier work, and therefore, painted with a more realistic technique.

The *Church at Auvers* (1890) is a characteristic example of Van Gogh's style at this time, incorporating many techniques that were common in the Auvers period. The color palette has a similarity to Bouquet, employing dark colors and eliminating the use of chrome yellow. There is a variety of brushstrokes used in this painting: the church is painted with thin criss-cross brushstrokes and the grass is painted with precise, but varied brushstrokes; both are highly agitated. In contrast, the brushstroke in Bouquet, while varied, is systematic and controlled.

Saint-Remy is also a period that cannot accommodate the particular qualities of *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*. As stated above, during this period, Van Gogh aimed to separate himself from the state of mind that made him decide to commit him-

self. His paintings reflected his anguish and inability to understand what was wrong with him. *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* shows an obsession with a perfectly systematic, very precise, contained brushstroke that is almost academic in its exploration of different marks. This makes it less likely that it would have been produced during the time when Van Gogh aimed to look more into his psychological self than into precise artistic techniques.

During the Saint-Remy period, Van Gogh produced paintings such as *Wheatfield with Cypresses* (1889) (fig. 4) and *First Steps* (after Millet) (1890). These paintings have significant characteristics of the Saint-Remy period, which are not seen in *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*. In *Wheatfield with Cypresses*, Van Gogh uses his common chrome yellow and he applies a lot of thick impasto to the canvas. In Bouquet, the closest the viewer gets to thick paint is in some of the flowers, but it is not applied in the way it was typically done in other Van Gogh paintings. In fact, the paint is applied so thickly in *Wheatfield* that it cracked after drying, and this is seen in other paintings of the Saint-Remy period. Also, unlike *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* where brushstroke covers every inch of the canvas, in *Wheatfield with Cypresses*, the artist has left pieces of the canvas unpainted. For *First Steps* (after Millet), Van Gogh applied brushstrokes in a very distinctive manner that is circular and swirled. This swirled brushstroke cannot be found in the still life. In *First Steps* (after Millet), the viewer is also able to see parts of the canvas because Van Gogh relies very heavily on outline without



much detail. This is very different from how *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* is depicted.

The period after Paris (1888) and before Saint-Remy (1889) presents itself as a possible time frame in which *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* was painted. While Van Gogh was in Paris, the master Impressionists heavily influenced him. This was reflected in the works he produced while he lived in Paris. However, Van Gogh was unhappy with the way he was painting, and he moved to Arles in southern France. He wanted to do more with color, to capture its intensity and extremes. "Color expresses something in itself, one cannot do without this, one must use it; what is beautiful, really beautiful- is also correct."<sup>20</sup>

It was in Arles, in particular, that he learned about Japanese art and culture, and it affected him in both his life and painting style. Van Gogh longed to feel connected to Japanese culture: "he was establishing a connection with the art he admired so much and with the exemplary lifestyle of the Orient."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, he saw it as a challenge: "The Japanese draw quickly, very quickly, like a lightning flash, because their nerves are finer, their feeling simpler."<sup>22</sup> Van Gogh wanted that simpler feeling and faster style, and the techniques he used during this period to get them consisted of very precise and systematic brushstrokes. The *Flowering Orchard* (fig. 5) is one of the best examples of these techniques during this period.<sup>23</sup> Van Gogh's instinct for color was at its best: "You see things with an eye more Japanese, you feel color differently."<sup>24</sup>

In *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, the background has the same type of precise and premeditated brushstroke that is seen in the paintings of the Arles period. If we look closer at *The Flowering Orchard*, the main difference between it and *Bouquet* is that in the former, each line in the grass section stands by itself, whereas in *Bouquet*, each line is close to the next. The second stylistic similarity is the way the stems of the flowers are drawn: the lines are very defined and angular, similar to what is seen in the branches of the orchard tree.

Van Gogh's still life painting, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, is an important piece, demonstrating the quality of Van Gogh's later works while presenting unexpected characteristics and color choices. There is little question that it is by Van Gogh: the provenance of *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* is impeccable. One of the first places where *Bouquet* was seen was in Marie Harriman's gallery. Marie Harriman studied art history and married Averell Harriman, a businessman. She turned her modern art interest into a business and was known to have connections with the best modern art dealers. It is likely that *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* was purchased in one of the many trips to Paris that Marie Harriman took with her husband.<sup>25</sup>

*Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* can be situated in the fall of the Arles period in Van Gogh's oeuvre. For Van Gogh, most still-life paintings were used as 'studies' in order to achieve mastery of technique or subtleties in color. This still-life painting may even be

considered a study because there is a certain degree of carelessness in the application of color. The paint in each flower is not entirely clean, indicating that Van Gogh was either careless when applying the paint or that he did it in a fast-paced manner in which he did not wait for the painting to dry.

Van Gogh had just arrived in Arles during the fall. He was at the point where he was trying to detach from the strict Impressionist rules learned in Paris and find new styles and techniques. The use of color theory, precise brushstrokes, and some degree of Japanese influence further indicate the Arles context. At this time, Van Gogh's still-life paintings were methods to find new techniques that could be used in other projects. This still-life is placed in the timeframe when he was in between two major periods.

In conclusion, during the fall of 1888, Van Gogh painted a study of a bouquet that demonstrated his mastery of brushstroke, use of complementary colors, and awareness of Japanese culture. At a crossroads in his work, he was also still incorporating influences from Dutch and French still-life painting that he admired when he was younger. As a transition work, Van Gogh ultimately created a curious piece that would raise many questions for its audience.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Metropolitan Museum, "Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase." 2011. [http://www.metmuseum.org/works\\_of\\_art/collection\\_database/all/bouquet\\_of\\_flowers\\_in\\_a\\_vase\\_vincent\\_van\\_gogh/objectview.aspx?page=1&sort=6&sortdir=asc&keyword=bouquet%20of%20flowers%20%20van%20gogh&fp=1&dd1=0&dd2=0&vw=1&colIID=0&OID=110000967&vT=1&hi=0&ov=0](http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/all/bouquet_of_flowers_in_a_vase_vincent_van_gogh/objectview.aspx?page=1&sort=6&sortdir=asc&keyword=bouquet%20of%20flowers%20%20van%20gogh&fp=1&dd1=0&dd2=0&vw=1&colIID=0&OID=110000967&vT=1&hi=0&ov=0). (September 2011).
- 2 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII* (New York: Little Brown, 1991), 426.
- 3 Judith Bumpus, *Van Gogh's Flowers* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1998), 9.
- 4 Ralph Fabri, *Complete Guide to Flower Painting* (New York: Watson- Guptill Publications, 1968), 14-15.
- 5 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 513.
- 6 This refers to multiple letters in the period Van Gogh arrived in Paris (March 1886- February 20th, 1888) and learned who the Impressionists were. He longed to be part of their movement, but when he realized that he was not like them, he moved again.
- 7 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 419.
- 8 Idem., 419-425.
- 9 Idem., 452.
- 10 Ingo F. Walther and Rainer Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: the Complete Paintings* (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 505-507.
- 11 Idem., 492-498.
- 12 Idem., 643-647.
- 13 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -V.II*, 513.
- 14 Walther and Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: the Complete Paintings*, 643-647.
- 15 Metropolitan Museum, "Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase."
- 16 Ian Clark and Helen Lee, *Name that Flower: The Identification of Flowering Plants* (Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1987), 180.
- 17 Susan Stein, Ethan Asher, and Colin B. Bailey, *The Annenberg Collection: Masterpieces of Impressionism and Post-impressionism* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009) 230-234.

- 18 Idem., 230-234 and email correspondence with Dr. Van Tilborgh, who is in contact with Dr. Hans den Nijs.
- 19 Idem., 230-234.
- 20 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 428.  
In a letter to his friend Horace M. Levens (p.513), Van Gogh explains how he seeks to “harmonize brutal extremes. Trying to render intense color and not a grey harmony.”
- 21 Walther and Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: the Complete Paintings*, 329.
- 22 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 590.
- 23 Walther and Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: the Complete Paintings*, 329-330.
- 24 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 590.
- 25 Provenance is seen in Metropolitan Museum website, “Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase.” And Marie Harriman is mentioned in an article by Nancy Yeide. “The Marie Harriman Gallery.” *The Smithsonian Institution* 39 (1999): 2-11. The article also mentions that Marie Harriman purchased Van Gogh’s Roses.

# Munch's *Madonna*: Exposing Motherhood in Nineteenth Century Europe

Helena Gomez

Late nineteenth-century Europe was characterized by the slow decline of Church power since the French Revolution, modern developments in science, and acceptance of physical and biological human needs; but more importantly, there emerged an ambivalent atmosphere governing the male population around the phenomenon of the New Woman.<sup>1</sup> The New Woman introduced new tenets of social, sexual, and economic freedom pushing the limits of patriarchal Europe. Thus, the dubiousness of the *fin-de-siècle* led to an artistic society that represented the cultural moment through daring compositions. The 1895 painting, *Madonna* (fig.1), by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, situates a uniquely late nineteenth-century image of motherhood epitomized by the icon of the Virgin Mary in relation to the New

Woman, demonstrating a shift in the nature of motherhood: that from a moral duty towards an option in a woman's life. The methodologies of iconography and feminism unravel the symbolically-charged painting, and serve as a means to understand the social implications of motherhood in nineteenth-century Europe.

Where does Munch's *Madonna* fit in the context of nineteenth-century cultural ambivalence towards the emerging New Woman? Although much of Munch's work has been viewed in a misogynistic light, criticized as the objectification of women in the extreme, and seen as a threat to the sanctity of motherhood, there may be room for more subtle interpretation. Munch's *Madonna* reflects the changing role of motherhood as a social arrangement, and the exploration of the feminine through the New Woman.

The Virgin Mary, icon of purity and paradigmatic image of the unconditional loving and caring mother, represents the idealization of motherhood *par excellence*. Characterized since Renaissance Mariological imagery as the embodiment of chastity, she is most often depicted as soft, delicate, fully clothed, and accompanied by the Christ Child. Mary is venerated for her infinite compassion and boundless affection towards her child. These characteristics are reflected in Raphael's *Tempi Madonna* (fig. 2) from 1508, where her erect posture can serve as a metaphor for the moral virtuosity of society. She smiles at Christ, embraces him, and presents herself as a caring mother. Raphael's *Madonna* embodies idealized motherhood, which is defined as "self-abnegation,

unstinting love, intuitive knowledge of nurturance and unalloyed pleasure in children.”<sup>2</sup> However, she is painted in Munch’s *Madonna* (fig. 1) in the most unconventional, even profane manner. The Virgin Mary appears alone in a rather dark and private environment, therefore, shifting the focus of the representation toward the female figure. Portraying her in the nude forces the viewer to question her identity as the Virgin Mary. Cast in the light of nineteenth-century secularized modern society, Munch’s *Madonna* diverges widely from the “traditional” depiction of the mother of God and is presented as the mother of modern society, the New Woman, with all the attendant ambivalence surrounding this new figure.

The deviation from the traditional Madonna reflects divergence from traditional values and beliefs experienced by Munch and his contemporaries. Following the rise of natural science and theories of evolution pioneered by Charles Darwin, religious perspectives were called into question. Europe suffered from a feeling of moral and social decay, referred to as “degeneration,” as a result of the emphasis on the biological sciences towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In Munch’s own intellectual circles, Hans Jaeger personifies this “degeneration.” As leader of the Kristiania bohème in Kristiania, Norway, he had a radical nihilist philosophy, favoring free love—non-marital sexual relations—and the eroticization of women. This anarchist attitude defied the strict Lutheran upbringing of Munch by his father, Christian Munch.<sup>4</sup> However, Munch’s distant and complicated relationship with his highly devout father, combined

with the loss of several family members, pushed him away from religious devotion. Munch and Jaeger’s close friendship in the 1880s introduced the former to the societal values “dedicated to the gods of machine and money, degrading human relations.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, Edvard Munch’s experience in society at the *fin-de-siècle* was the culmination in microcosm of a long series of events which demoralized, secularized, and modernized Europe.

This new “degenerated” society, consumed by the importance given to human interactions, created space for new kinds of relationships, including free love between men and women. In Munch’s case, he mentions several times his inability to commit and be exclusive to one love because it got in the way of art.<sup>6</sup> However, he enjoyed the liberty, boldness, and daring attitudes of the New Woman. This new freedom of the body is reflected in the *Madonna*’s arching posture. Taking control over her body, she finds herself willing to participate in free love and to bend the limits of patriarchal Europe. Munch narrates in his private journals an encounter which reveals his feelings towards free love. He writes: “one evening in a/ café I remark—/Don’t you think/two like us/—we have seen/life—you are rich/and free—why—/shouldn’t we/take advantage of/avail/benefit from/make love useful together/—and meet without/love’s coercion.”<sup>7</sup> Munch’s tolerance toward non-marital sexual relations is apparent in these words as he openly proposes to this woman in a café and treats it as an ordinary activity. Yet, although free love brought a kind of liberty, it also corrupted the emergence of the New



Woman.

Though the New Woman revolutionized the conventional understanding of womanhood, her freedom was condemned by Europe's patriarchal society. More precisely, decadent and misogynistic intellectual circles portrayed the liberation of womanhood through representations of the "*femme fatale*," or the "deadly woman." As explained by historian Virginia Allen, "artists and poets created femme fatales in their work as an expression of what they saw in women who were beginning to declare their sexual as well as political freedom."<sup>8</sup> This image of an empowered woman who claims her subjectivity was corrupted through the objectification of the female body and an emphasis on its "evil" nature. Although men fantasized about the erotic image of women and benefitted from women who indulged in their "sexuality without concern for her lover of the moment,"<sup>9</sup> men also desired the prior idealization of womanhood and motherhood that persisted in society. This society, therefore, exposed a dichotomy in the sentiment towards the New Woman: she was desired as a sexually-active being yet she was longed for as an idealization of compliance and integrity. The New Woman remained overshadowed by the long western tradition of the obedient woman and continued to be ostracized in artistic circles.

Trademarks of the *femme fatale* can be seen in Munch's rendering of the Madonna figure. In Munch's *Madonna*, the uncertainty, pessimism, and materialism that characterized the decadence of the

*fin-de-siècle* are firmly embedded in her obscure and sensual character. Munch's rendering of the pale yellow nude body emerging from the swirls of blues and browns in the background evokes gloomy sensations which are further articulated in the deep circles surrounding the eye orbits. This decadent ambiance can be further perceived in the series of lithographs of *Madonna* (fig. 3) where Munch's dark lines create an even greater ominous feeling. Any idea of purity has been abandoned completely as she appears nude and in the full ecstasy of love, underscoring a society rooted in concrete, physical expression. Moreover, she fully embodies the implications of the *femme fatale* for whom sex and death are intertwined. Munch has emphasized this aspect through the dark palette, contrasted with crimson red and fiery orange, as well as by her long black locks of hair blowing around and wrapping her body. The placement of the arms behind her evokes the impression of vulnerability and total voyeuristic exposure pertaining to the *femme fatale*.

In Munch's life, this image of the *female fatale* was represented by Dagny Juel. Arriving in Berlin in 1892, Munch marked this period by his friendships with Stanislaw Pruszyński and August Strindberg. They comprised a male-dominated, intellectual circle in Berlin where philosophy, art, and literature were discussed. Dagny Juel<sup>10</sup> was introduced and accepted into the male group of artists and intellectuals as a longtime acquaintance from Munch's Kristiania. She interacted, smoked, and voiced her opinions with the rest of them. The Swedish writer Adolf Paul

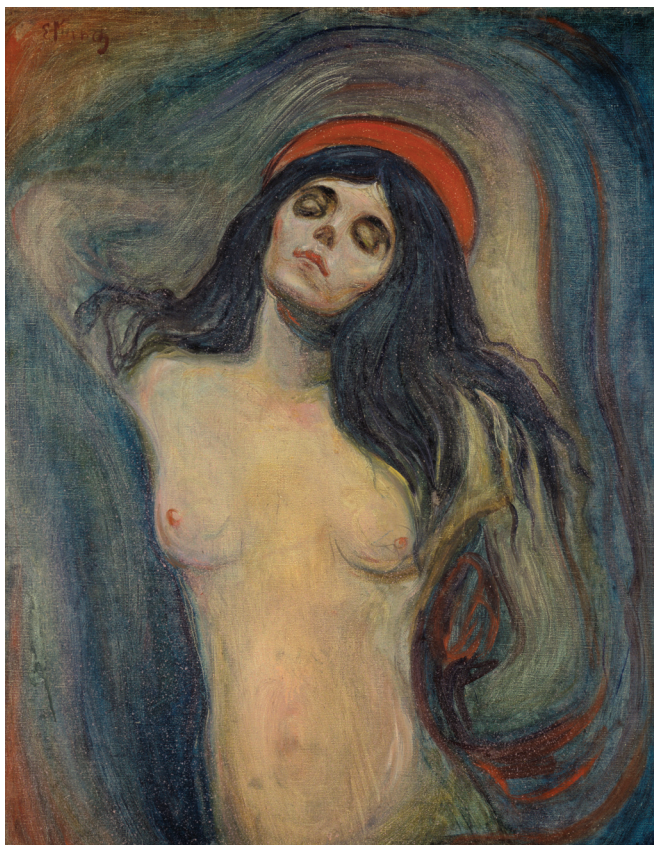


Fig. 1 Edvard Munch: *Madonna* 1894  
Oil on canvas  
90 x 68.5 cm  
Munch Museum, Oslo  
MM M 68 (Woll M 365)  
Artwork: © Munch Museum / Munch-Ellingsen Group /  
ARS, NY 2012.  
Photo: © Munch Museum  
© 2012 The Munch Museum / The Munch-Ellingsen Group /  
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Fig. 2 Raphael, *The Tempi Madonna*. 1507. Oil on poplar,  
75.3 x 51.6 cm. Inv. WAF 796. Alte Pinakothek, Bayerische  
Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, Germany.  
Photo: bpk, Berlin / Alte Pinakothek / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 3 Edvard Munch, *Madonna*. 1895-1902. Lithograph and  
woodcut, composition: 23 13/16 x 17 1/2" (60.5 x 44.5 cm);  
sheet (irreg.): 33 11/16 x 23 3/8" (85.6 x 59.3 cm).  
© 2012 The Munch Museum / The Munch-Ellingsen Group /  
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.  
Photo: © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA /  
Art Resource, NY.

recounts that Dagny was perceived by her sister as the personification of sin and by her girlfriends as a whore.<sup>11</sup> She was not aesthetically beautiful, but “it was the combination of intelligence, spirituality, inviolability and sensuality that comprised her fascination.”<sup>12</sup> Although apparently disreputable due to her divergence from the “obedient woman,” she was “the one woman in whom Munch forgave everything, the only one who made the transition from sensual goddess to mother and saint.”<sup>13</sup>

Though this transition from a sexual sphere to a sacred one is explained by Munch’s infatuation with and admiration of Dagny’s character, there is no conclusive evidence of a romantic relationship. She was desired by the four friends of the group—Pryszewski, Strindberg, Munch, and Dr. Carl Ludwig—but ultimately married Munch’s longtime friend Pryszewski. She became a dedicated wife and renounced her promiscuous behavior.<sup>14</sup> Though *Madonna* was conceived after Munch’s idealization of his sexual relationship with Millie Thaulow,<sup>15</sup> the image is modeled after Dagny in her physical traits: the slim torso, the small waist, the pale face, and half-smile. More significantly, Munch’s depiction may not simply embody the *femme fatale*’s evil nature, but may attempt to suggest his own wholesome relationship to Dagny.

This wholesome relationship with Dagny can be represented by the holiness of the Madonna suggested through several stylistic devices. As an iconographic marker, Munch’s thick brushstrokes create a crimson halo behind her head in order to signify her

sacredness. However, her implied holiness embodies the “modern soul” of the nineteenth-century. The “modern soul” refers to the new mindset in Europe, one which is detached from conservative religious life and revolutionized by bohemian revelry, and as quoted from Munch, “subject to the instabilities of modernity.”<sup>16</sup> Some of these instabilities of modernity were produced by developments on the reproductive front, relating to the physiology of women, childbirth, and contraception. These reproductive conditions may be symbolically embedded in the crimson red of the Madonna’s halo, since red represents the color of blood, including the blood of menstruation and childbirth. Ultimately, reproduction was the primary function of women since “female physiology, specifically that of the uterus, defined the female role.”<sup>17</sup>

Combining the traditional and the modern in *Madonna* leads to a daring dualism which triggered the religious sensitivities of Europe at the time of the painting’s exhibition in the Berlin Secession and which still accrues to the work. When the painting was exhibited in Berlin in 1902 for the first time, Munch’s contemporaries thought of the painting as an “unstable conjunction of blasphemy and divinity.”<sup>18</sup> Though subject to the eye of the beholder, the Madonna’s face induces a range of emotion from sexuality to death to the tenderness of a mother, and she is portrayed with the soft and delicate facial features distinctive of the Virgin Mary. Even though the halo is the only concrete symbol related to the Virgin Mary in the painting, its meaning is inescapable. Munch bridges the divinity of Madonna and the hu-

manity of the New Woman through the theme of love. Love functions as an underlying emotion that pertains to all women, whether in the realm of the divine or the natural world. Munch first painted *Madonna* as part of the “Love” series<sup>19</sup> and later incorporated the painting into the *Frieze of Life* exhibition of 1902 under the section titled “Seeds of Love.”<sup>20</sup>

In the *Frieze of Life*, Munch exposes the cycle of life and uses the Madonna painting to interconnect themes of love, life, and death. As the Virgin Mary, she is the epitome of maternal love and giver of life. As the New Woman, she is sexually charged, guardian of her own body, and possessor of reproductive rights. Munch encircles the female figure in thick brushstrokes producing a cyclic motion that evokes the cycle of life from birth to death. The symbolic meaning can be extended into the biological sphere indicating physiological states of motherhood which undergo the stages of reproduction, fecundation, and childbirth.<sup>21</sup> In the original painting, the frame of the canvas contained the image of an embryo in the lower left corner and spermatozoa moving clockwise throughout the frame, further underscoring the subject of life-giving. Munch suggestively uses red on specific areas of the body pertaining to reproduction, such as the navel and the breasts, as well as the frame, all of which, including the fetus and the sperm, are carried over in the lithographic version of the *Madonna* (fig. 3). The emphases on childbirth do not seem arbitrary; they ultimately raise questions about the maternal image of the New Woman.

Combined with the eroticism of the period, the presence of references to life continues throughout the composition. Reflecting upon the painting, Munch wrote:

The pause when the entire world halted in its orbit. Your face embodies all the world's beauty. Your lips, crimson red like the coming fruit, glide apart as in pain. The smile of a corpse. Now life and death joins hands. The chain is joined that ties the thousands of past generations to the thousands of generations to come.<sup>22</sup>

The words of Edvard Munch not only confirm the passage from birth to death implied in the *Frieze* as a whole, but also echo the feeling of pessimism and death that revolved around the *fin-de-siècle* and its links to ambivalence about the New Woman. Munch reveals the pessimistic concern with the empowering of woman and especially, her decisions concerning procreation. Women's choice to reject motherhood was affected by the attitudes of the decadence movement, and the wider availability of both contraception and employment outside the home.<sup>23</sup> This rejection was strengthened by the scientific revelations that offered opportunities to practice radical methods of abortion;<sup>24</sup> thus, women acquired freedom to control their own bodies, concomitantly producing uncertainty within the male population. Men like Munch were not only troubled by ideas concerning the end of civilization circulating



at the turn of the century, but also about prolonging the human race when women now had the power to reject procreation.<sup>25</sup> In the *Frieze of Life*, Munch indicates the Madonna's vital role by presenting motherhood as the link between generations. He relates the subject of motherhood to that of death, previously interpreted as the death of the mother in the natural cycle of motherhood: the high maternal mortality trajectory of intercourse, conception, and death.<sup>26</sup> However, in Munch's *Madonna*, the relation between life and death not only speaks of the death of the mother but also implies the power held by the mother in her choice to conceive. The fetus on the frame can either symbolize the conception of a new life, or if seen as a variation on the skull and crossbones motif, it can symbolize the natural death of the embryo, or abortion for which the New Woman bears responsibility.

This responsibility for reproduction is thus a product of the "modern soul" and carries dualistic repercussion; it is an advantage and a liberation, yet it carries the burden of death and amoral behavior produced by the "instabilities of modernity." In terms of procreation, modernization clearly embraced scientific advances in the field of contraception. Knowledge of some sort of contraceptive practices had been present since the beginning of time, but had grown more reliable in the eighteenth-century.<sup>27</sup> At first, contraceptive methods were only available to the higher social classes not only because of their resources to pay, but also because of their ability to access secret knowledge about the procedures. When in the nineteenth-century diffusion of informa-

tion and practice spread to all social classes, it dramatically affected the social order. Promulgation of this information was condemned by societal values and punished by the authorities. The combination of availability of contraceptives and a rise in promiscuity apparent throughout the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century led to increased prostitution, low birthrates, and an overall freedom of the body. Now "social order was grounded in natural order."<sup>28</sup> The use of contraceptives was nonetheless viewed as against the laws of nature because, in the context of Darwinian theory, "evolutionary success for women, meant reproductive success."<sup>29</sup> Even most feminist movements of the period remained opposed to their use because they found contraceptives, in terms of evolutionary theory, to go against the natural order which recognizes motherhood as the primary responsibility for women.

Women's movements in the mid-nineteenth century focused on the "maternal dilemma," referring to the ability to combine motherhood and work. Due to the high demand for working women in the industrial sectors, the working mother immediately seized upon the development of contraceptives in order to control the number of children she bore. Having children was expensive and time-consuming, time which single mothers as well as working mothers could not spare. Childbirth was also "fatal" for the New Women as it restricted them to traditional female roles; thus, motherhood in the context of nineteenth-century industrialization became a social function rather than a moral duty. Though the "maternal dilemma" was

a liberating debate for women, it further fueled the anxiety suffered by men. Society, in general, found the maternal dichotomy of the New Woman to detract from the idealization of womanhood. The empowering qualities of “passion, ambition, virile energy, the love of strong excitement, self-assertion, fierceness, [and] undisciplined temper”<sup>30</sup> that gave definition to the working mother were effectively diminished by the convention of the *femme fatale*.

Throughout the nineteenth-century, women’s movements and feminist philosophy grew stronger and aimed for equality of marriage and the liberation of women in marriage. Nonetheless, married women were in a state of “powerlessness over [their] fortune, powerlessness over [their] children.”<sup>31</sup> The New Woman favored free love and chose to reject child-bearing in order to take control over her own life. Another position championed by feminist movements considered motherhood a right rather than a natural obligation. There is no final resolution of the perception of motherhood at the end of nineteenth century because even within the feminist movements, the array of visions of what constituted women’s progress varied immensely. However, they shared opinions concerning the nature of their opposition to enforced motherhood, stating it:

was not to motherhood itself, but to motherhood as a coerced service to a patriarchal family and state, and when free to control their own reproductive decisions (a freedom that

was defined in many different ways) women would willingly become mothers.<sup>32</sup>

It is not surprising that particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century when women were openly gaining freedom in the work place, the home, and over their bodies, patriarchy projected deep ambivalence, a dark vision, and ultimate rejection of the New Woman.

This anxiety was the result of misunderstanding and a lack of knowledge surrounding the psychological, biological, and emotional needs of the female. While explaining how each of Munch’s paintings relates to the *Frieze of Life* as symbols of the different aspects of love, biographer Sue Prideaux identifies the *Madonna* painting as the representation of the “mystery of sex.”<sup>33</sup> This “mystery” has manifestations in biological, emotional, and religious subjects. In *Madonna*, Munch points towards the “mystery” of the biological implications of sexual reproduction in the circular brushstrokes surrounding the abdomen of the female figure, further emphasized by the light source in the painting. Her breasts and navel have a vivid glow, and her nipples have a touch of red; these symbols of maternity seem to imply pregnancy. However, the “mystery” may refer not only to the biological process of pregnancy, but in concert with the disembodied fetus on the frame, its prohibition or termination. Moreover, this “mystery” signifies the lack of psychological understanding of the female at this point in time as indicated by the rejection of the New

Woman into society.

At an emotional level, Munch himself was never able to engage in a stable relationship with a woman. Reflecting upon this, Munch writes:

what do you want to do?—the Bible calls/free love/whore—/But what should/one do—/For marriage/bad luck/and sorrow have not/prepared me/Or is it my mission/What benefit/is?/And if I/am incapable of/a great love—when/its roots is/pulled plucked out of/my soul/—And marriage/without love/which stops there/it stops/does not move/stops there/besides that, in/addition/is idle halts/remaining in place/stuck fast/If like now never/for me the portal to the upper rooms of love/can be opened—/I shall remain/in darkness/—day in day out/—year after year/...again.<sup>34</sup>

His private journals reveal a confused emotional drive towards women and free love. He is torn between the excitement and the burden induced by love, and he condemns matrimony because “marriage gets in the way of art.”<sup>35</sup> On a religious level, the “mystery of sex” reads as the mystery surrounding the Immaculate Conception. This inevitably introduces religious considerations, while also reiterating the duality of physical and spiritual love. For Munch, “an artwork is a crystal. A crystal has a soul and a mind, and the artwork must also have these.”<sup>36</sup> In

the mysteries of the *Madonna*, he attempts to capture the soul and mind of nineteenth century Europe, detached from conservative religious underpinnings and advancing into spiritual freedom and liberation of the body.

In accordance with the rebellious character of the New Woman, *Madonna* carries the excitement of nineteenth century women's redefinition of femininity projected onto the realm of the divine. As a product of an anguished patriarchal society whose moral values had been corrupted and longing for a return to the idealization of womanhood, Munch generates an image charged with social and religious anxiety complicated by medical and biological interventions.<sup>37</sup> Part of the Symbolist movement and an era of decadence, he diverges significantly and meaningfully from the traditional portrayal of the Madonna. Munch's *Madonna*, though divine in nature, embodies the “modern soul” of decadent nineteenth-century Europe, and thus, is considered ‘blasphemous’ for the audience of the time and for all time. Munch's *Madonna* in her erotic posture exposes her nude body to the viewer, signifying her as object of desire; yet she also reflects the result of the struggle of social, religious, and scientific views of nineteenth century Europe. The Madonna is no longer portrayed as the loving mother who is subordinated to her child, but as the *femme fatale* who has released herself from obligatory motherhood and now carries within her the seeds of life, and thanks to the proliferation of contraception and abortion, death. Finally, Munch's unconventional sacred image captures the transition

of nineteenth-century Europe to modernity, exposing the status of motherhood as a social arrangement dependant on the liberation of the New Woman.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 For more information about the New Woman see Whitney Chadwick, "Modernism, Abstraction, and the New Woman, 1910-1925" *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 252-278.
- 2 Rozsika Parker, *Mother Love/Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* (New York: Basicbooks, 1995), 22.
- 3 Richard Olson, *Science and Scientist in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Pall Mall Press, 1971), 277.
- 4 Edvard Munch was son of Christian Munch, a doctor and medical officer, who as son of a priest followed strict religious practices. Edvard's childhood was marked by the severe religious upbringing of his father. In Munch's words "my father was temperamentally nervous and obsessively religious—to the point of psychoneurosis." Sue Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 2.
- 5 Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers* (Great Britain: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2005), 368.
- 6 J. Gill Holland, ed. *The Private Journals of Edvard Munch: We Are Flames Which Pour out of the Earth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2005), 88.
- 7 Ibid., 35.
- 8 Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (New York: Whitston, 1983), xi.
- 9 Ibid., 4.
- 10 Dagny Juel was the daughter of a Kongsvinger physician and the niece of the current prime minister of Norway.
- 11 Sue Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 143.
- 12 Ibid., 144.
- 13 Ibid., 145.
- 14 Ibid., 147-150.
- 15 Edvard Munch met Millie Thaulow in 1885 as wife of Dr. Carl Thaulow. She was Munch's first love yet marked by the anxieties of dealing with an adulterous romance.
- 16 Kynaston McShine and Patricia G. Berman, *Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 36.
- 17 Shelley Wood Cordulack, *Edvard Munch and the Physiology of Symbolism* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2002), 68.
- 18 McShine, *Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul*, 39.



- 19 Edvard Munch exhibited his "Love" painting series in 1895 including: *Mysticism*, *Two People*, *Two Eyes*, *Kiss*, *Vampire*, *The Loving Woman*, *Madonna*, *Sphinx*, *Separation*, *Hands*, *Jealousy*, *Evening*, *Insane Mood*, *The Scream*, and *Vignette*.
- 20 *Frieze of Life* was Edvard Munch's first exhibition at the Berlin Secession in 1902. The exhibit was divided in thematic sections. *Seeds of Love* presented: *The Voice* (1893), *Red and White* (1894), *Eye in Eye* (c. 1895), *The Dance on the Shore* (c.1900), *The Kiss* (c.1892) and *Madonna* (1894). *The Flowering and Passing of Love* included: *Ashes* (1894), *Vampire* (1893), *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900), *Jealousy* (1895), *Sphinx or Woman in Three Stages* (1893-5) and *Melancholy* (1894-1895). *Anxiety* showed *Anxiety* (1894), *Evening on Karl Johan* (1894), *Red Virginia Creeper* (1898-1900), *Golgotha* (c. 1900) and *The Scream* (1893). The final wall took the theme of *Death*: *The Deathbed*, *Fever* (1895), *Death in the Sick Room* (1893), *Hearse on Postdammer Platz* (1902), *Metabolism* (c. 1898), and *Dead Mother and Child* (1893-1899).
- 21 Cordulack, *Edvard Munch and the Physiology of Symbolism*, chapter 6.
- 22 Philippe Julian, *Dreamers of decadence: symbolist painters of the 1890's*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Pall Mall Press, 1971), 40.
- 23 Annie Besant, *The Law of Population*, 1877. She informs that Norway and Switzerland are two countries with lowest birthrates.
- 24 Sharon L. Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 167.
- 25 Ibid., 177.
- 26 Ibid., 177.
- 27 Norman Edwin Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 210.
- 28 Shari L Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 221.
- 29 Ibid., 221.
- 30 Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public: 1850-1900 Documents of the Victorian Women's Movement* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 20.
- 31 Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe 1890 - 1970: the Maternal Dilemma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 46.
- 32 Ibid., 88.
- 33 Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream*, 150.
- 34 Holland, *The Private Journals of Edvard Munch: We Are Flames Which Pour out of the Earth*, 50.
- 35 Ibid., 88.
- 36 Prideaux, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream*, 120.
- 37 Olson, *Science and Scientist in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 277.

# Golden Halo: Gustav Klimt's *The Three Ages of Life* as Modern Madonna

Mary Kate Kelly

When one reviews the art historical canon referencing Gustav Klimt, the results are the same: Klimt was a very sexual man who painted very sexual women. Contemporary critics look at the culture of Vienna at the time, the artist's personal affairs, his sumptuous use of gold, and brazen poses and exposure of his models to justify the notion that Klimt's work was exclusively prurient<sup>1</sup>. However, this method of analysis does not account for the many influences on Klimt's style or the positive weight of his personal relationships. Klimt was not just a painter of female sexuality, but a devotee of women whose appreciation for the female form was akin to divine adoration. Indeed, elements of many of his works evoke respect for the female much like images of the Christian Madonna. This respect is perhaps a reflection of the art-

ist's 1903 trip to Ravenna and subsequent exposure to the mosaics there, and/or a mirror of the artist's loving personal relationships—as Klimt did not simply use women for personal pleasure and exploitation. Through biography, visual analysis, and iconography, I propose that Klimt's 1905 work, *The Three Ages of Life* (fig. 1) is a concrete example of the artist's positive relationship with the female. To support this claim, I will suggest *The Three Ages of Life* as a modern Madonna and Child, illustrating that Gustav Klimt's work was not exclusively prurient, nor even a straightforward representation of the cycle of life through the figure of an anonymous woman.

Klimt was born in 1862 in Baumgarten, a Viennese suburb, the son of an engraver with modest means.<sup>2</sup> He lived the rest of his life in Vienna, moving to the city with his family, where he remained with his mother and unmarried sisters even after his father's death in 1892.<sup>3</sup> During Klimt's lifetime, Vienna was steeped in “the parallelism between taboo and licentiousness, by which a woman is either put on a pedestal or unabashedly exploited depending on her social standing,” which “managed to do nothing less than ruin Vienna around 1900...corrupted it and paved way for both the zealots and the advocates of a unified moral standard to run riot with full abandon.”<sup>4</sup> These stigmas are necessary to note in order to establish that the artist produced his work within a culture which contained a deep-seeded prejudice against women. His depictions of the female form, then, whether intended to be over-sexualized displays or not, would likely have been taken by his

contemporary critics as such.

This point is clearly illustrated through the writings of Karl Kraus, editor of the Viennese journal *Frackel* (Torch) which “[lit] the way to the world of good taste’ for the bourgeoisies” at the turn of the century.<sup>5</sup> Of Klimt’s work, he writes: “Whether she is called Hygieia or Judith, Madame X or Madame Y, all his figures have the pallor of the professionally misunderstood woman, and Mr. Klimt has given them the unmistakable dark rings, or shall we say Schottenringe [an anti-Semitic reference to a woman’s dark eyes and coloring] under their eyes.”<sup>6</sup> Although the Jewish bourgeoisie of Vienna were vastly influential and resounding patrons of the arts, their visual representation was still marred by the inversely related rise of Austrian nationalism and pan-European anti-Semitism at this time.<sup>7</sup>

The depiction of Jewish women was particularly clouded by negative associations. At the time, the use of a Jewish model tapped into the prejudiced over-sexualizing of Jewish women—a phenomena which traces back to the Medieval fear of Jewish women seducing men away from Christianity—of which Gustav Klimt seems to have been aware; he seems to have capitalized on it for his more licentious works (i.e. *Judith I* of 1901 and *Judith II (Salome)* of 1909).<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the young mother figure in *The Three Ages of Life* is easily identifiable with fin-de-siècle Vienna’s rising sense of Austrian nationalism. Her ethnicity indicates that Klimt knew the cultural stigmas associated with the coloring of his models,

and therefore, chose a fair-haired woman to illustrate the maternal love seen in *The Three Ages of Life* following in the tradition of a Christian Virgin and Child.

In 1903, Klimt visited Ravenna and Venice twice, viewing the art and studying Byzantine mosaic techniques “in-depth and in person.”<sup>9</sup> It was these visits which influenced the start of Klimt’s “golden period” and inspired his intense ornamentation of the female form.<sup>10</sup> This “golden period” is the period within Klimt’s works (beginning directly after his 1903 trip to Ravenna) in which the artist used gold leaf and various metallic paints as primary construction tools.<sup>11</sup> It also is marked by a sense of *horror vacui*: typically, Klimt’s “golden” works are made up of intense ornamentation offsetting gently treated human figures to create drama and lushness within the work.<sup>12</sup> The artist formulated this style in concert with the Byzantine works he saw abroad, including the colors, themes, and construction of mosaics, especially those of Ravenna, and particularly those found in Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo (fig. 2, 3).

The visual similarities between Klimt’s *The Three Ages of Life* and the mosaics of Ravenna begin with the color palette. The gold used for the background in the mosaics is featured in the bubble-like patterning which fills the oblong brown space in Klimt’s painting and adorns the mother-figure’s hair. This same gold is present as highlights in the metallic bronze panels which make up the majority of the background of *The Three Ages of Life*. It is mixed with white dots and pale patches, creating an almost

marbled effect. This effect connects the painting to *Mosaic of procession of Virgins Saint Justina, Felicitia, Perpetua, Vincenza carrying crown symbol of martyr in Saint Apollinare Nuovo* (fig. 2), as the white dots appear like the plaster peaking through tessere. The effect is exceptionally important as it links Klimt's entire golden period to his 1903 visit to Ravenna, and can be easily cited in *The Three Ages of Life*.<sup>13</sup>

However, the most interesting palette similarity is the specific use of blue (the symbolic color of the Virgin Mary) in both Klimt's piece and the mosaics of Ravenna. *Mosaic of procession of Virgins Saint Justina, Felicitia, Perpetua, Vincenza carrying crown symbol of martyr in Saint Apollinare Nuovo* (fig. 2) leads the visitor's eye to the nave, where another mosaic—*Virgin and Child Enthroned With Four Angels* (fig. 3)—sits. In this mosaic, the Virgin Mary “is seated on a jeweled throne...[dressed] simply in a purple tunic with gold clavi and a purple *maphorion* or overmantel, part of which forms her headdress. She sits on a red cushion with gold stars and holds her right hand up in a gesture of blessing.”<sup>14</sup> Only here is the color blue utilized: in the jewels which adorn Mary's throne, as a slight outline of her face, the angels' halos, and highlights of the angels' robes. We can make the case that Klimt uses blue in the same way as the mosaics of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, where the color blue is used sparingly and in its traditional role to highlight the Virgin Mary and her retinue. Klimt harkens to this tendency by using a limited amount of blue in *The Three Ages of Life*, keeping it contained within small circles placed around the mother and child. The blue

acts in both cases to offset the figures of mother and child from the surrounding figures. This separation gives the mother and child a visual sense of otherworldliness, removing them from the realm of humanity and hinting at divinity.

Klimt also uses patterns like those seen in the mosaic (fig. 2 and 3). Scholars have yet to examine the connection, but this tendency is perhaps best illustrated through the “eye” pattern: a thin circle of color with a dot in the middle. This “eye” or bull's-eye pattern makes up the dresses of many of the processing virgins. Here, it appears as red and green alternating rows of “eyes” broken up by a beadlike string of brown and white, offset by golden fabric in the women's dresses. In Klimt's painting, this pattern appears as yellow and orange circles with light and dark red dots at their centers. Moreover, Klimt also reflects the golden stars of the Virgin's cushion in the eye patterning of the old crone's background (fig. 1 and 3).

Another key visual point yet to be analyzed by scholars, is the floral pattern which adorns the Virgin Mary's throne in *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels* (fig. 3). On either side of the seated Virgin, there are stylized flowers made of a blue jewel center with white jewel petals and a dark outline. This same pattern of flower is seen in Klimt's work adorning the hair of the mother figure (fig. 1). For the figure of the Virgin, the jeweled flowers pull the viewer's eye upwards to center on her face and the Christ Child. These flowers in Klimt's work have the same effect.





Fig. 1 Klimt, Gustav (1862-1918). *The Three Ages of Life*. 1905. Oil on canvas, 171 x 171 cm. Inv. 951  
Photo Credit : Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali/  
Art Resource, NY.  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, Italy.



Fig. 2 Mosaic of procession of Virgins Saint Justina, Felicitas, Perpetua, Vincenza carrying crown symbol of martyr in Saint Apollinare Nuovo, 6th century AD, Ravenna.

Photo Credit : Alfredo Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY



Fig. 3 *The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels*. Mosaic. Byzantine, 6th CE.

Photo Credit : Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY

S. Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy.

The white petals contrast with the mother figure's red hair and draw the viewer's eye up to her face and her connection with the child. This visual draw puts an emphasis on the physicality and humanity of the two figures, keeping in line with the Christian tradition of Virgin and child.

This point forces consideration of Klimt's use of flowers within *The Three Ages of Life*. The white flowers which draw the viewer's eye also create a round pile—like a crown or halo—resting on the hair of the mother figure (fig. 1). This detail harkens to the halo of the Virgin Mary (fig. 3). The artist suggests divinity, then, in the painting though relation to the mosaic.

These visual similarities suggest strongly that Klimt used the mosaics of Ravenna as a grounding point for the construction of *The Three Ages of Life*. The general palette the artist employed, the specific use of color within the painting, and the placement and type of patterning, especially flowers, all indicate Byzantine influences, specifically from Ravenna: this, in turn, grounds the work within the Christian religious tradition.

Do the apparent Byzantine influences in this piece indicate an iconographic corollary, which extends to the divine adoration of the female and the role of motherhood? The visual connection creates a foundation for further analysis, giving the viewer a solid direction to follow when searching for iconographical information. Early Byzantine art is derived “from [Constantinian] imperial court art,” rendered

Christian, and identifiable by “the richness of light, color, and texture that produces emotional intensity.”<sup>15</sup> Art of this period is also heavy with a “revived classicism,” a “love of intricate pattern,” and the highlighting of “texture and radiance,” which is especially apparent in the later Ravenna mosaics that Klimt visited in 1903.<sup>16</sup> At the time of Ravenna's construction, the “great Christian churches [brought] together all types of expression—biblical, idyllic, and symbolic—into compositions of great unity and beauty, which have now become recognizable and unmistakable as Christian art,” but which grew out of the pagan Roman court tradition.<sup>17</sup> It is this mixture of classical and Christian iconography which *The Three Ages of Life* references, and the identification of the Virgin on which Klimt appears to have capitalized in his own work.

Upon seeing *The Three Ages of Life*, the viewer's eye is first drawn to the figures of the mother and child. The image of a young woman holding a young child close to her naturally associates to iconographical representations of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child. The particular pose in Klimt's work is a variation of the style of an *Elousa* or Virgin of Tenderness—a depiction of the Virgin and Child “in which the child's face is pressed affectionately on the mother's.”<sup>18</sup> Although in this work the cheeks of the two are not actually touching, Klimt makes a clear allusion to the tradition by placing the face of the child in close proximity to the mother's and illustrating their faces with peaceful, tender expressions.

Interestingly, the center background panels which separate the mother and child from the crone figure also create two different planes within the work. This separation results in a mixed perspective in which the crone seems to be above and in front of the mother and child because of the aligning of her hair with the young woman's shoulder, while also occupying the space behind. There is a similar effect within many Byzantine works, mainly the use of "reversed perspective in the table, thrones, and footstools presenting a foreshortened view which comes from the other world in the picture, not from the spectator's human standpoint."<sup>19</sup> Such perspective gives Klimt's work an air of other-worldliness. It removes the figures from the realm of humanity and elevates them into another dimension—making the mother and child more than a simple daily life scene.

However, there is disunion with traditional representations of the Virgin and Child. Here, Klimt has shown a mother figure unclothed—not a generally accepted state for representing the Virgin. However, the figure's genitals and second breast are covered by the flowing blue cloth and the child—leaving just one breast exposed. This exposure may simply be a continuation of the theme of "signal at the breast" in which the nursing Christ child calls attention to the breast of the Virgin Mary to highlight his humanity.<sup>20</sup> These images of the Virgin and Christ child specifically focus the viewer's attention on the breast of the mother not to arouse a sexual response, but to remind the viewer that Christ, too, was human and relied on food to sustain his human condition.<sup>21</sup>

Another discordance is the sexualizing of the mother figure—especially in relation to the crone juxtaposed in the background. One could argue that the exposure of the young mother's breast, her total nudity, and the sense of voyeurism associated with her closed eyes refute the claim that this is a modern Madonna and Child—even one in the tradition of "signal at the breast." However, the image does not create a sexual connection between the viewer and the subject. Instead "the intimacy between the Virgin and Child...effects a like intimacy between these figures and the spectator," encouraging a sense of maternal memory, comfort, and peace within the viewer.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the exposed breast of the mother actually heightens the spiritual quality of the work, and serves to remove it further from the realm of the sexual.

Nevertheless, the lack of clothing on the mother figure creates a distinct disconnect between Klimt's work and the traditional representation of the Virgin Mary. However, Klimt was not the only artist of the time to show a Madonna in this way. Edvard Munch's earlier *Madonna* created a similar depiction of the Virgin between 1894 and 1895, showing a dark-haired woman with hands behind her back, completely exposing both breasts to the viewer, visibly nude to the waist with suggestion of complete nudity. This brazen exposure of both breasts combined with the figure's arched back create a noticeably sexual representation—making Klimt's single exposed breast modest in comparison, and together, deconstructing traditional images of the Virgin Mother.

Klimt's choice to depict the mother here with red hair connects her with the visual tradition of Mary Magdalene more closely than that of the Virgin Mary. The Magdalene is generally shown as a red-haired, young, attractive female, often with limited clothing or simply covered by her hair. Red in the earlier context connotes the Magdalene's licentious, sexual youth. It is not out of the question that Klimt's mother figure (or even the crone) could be the artist's nod to the visual trope of Mary Magdalene. Nevertheless, the presence of the child and the obvious display of maternal love still suggest that the figures represent the Virgin and Child. The potential reference, then, to Magdalene becomes a cultural statement; referencing the prejudiced Viennese view of women as either idealized creatures put on a pedestal (the Virgin Mary) or unashamedly exploited sexual beings (Mary Magdalene).<sup>23</sup> By combining the two, Klimt has shown a distinctly modern view of the female as both sexual and sacred.

If this is the case, the presence of the crone figure comes sharply into focus. If we see the red-headed mother as a hybrid figure mixing the visual canon of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, then the crone (visibly aging, hiding her face in shame) takes on the role of an antitype—Eve. The crone is placed on a forward plane, coming before the image of mother and child and creating a stark visual contrast: her age against the youth of the mother, her sagging breasts and stomach a reminder of the wear of childbirth on a female body, her dark brown skin with purple veins opposing the milky white of the

younger woman. Her presence, forward placement, and contrast of age all suggest that Klimt has used the crone not merely to indicate an aged woman in the final stage, but to create an Eve—the antitype of Mary. In “Mary Magdalene the messenger of life and joy, as sustained by their opposite pole, the messenger of death: the image of Eve, who [has]... been made the original source of sin and death.”<sup>24</sup> Like Eve, the crone comes before the mother figure; she hides her face in shame like Eve at the fall, but only together do they make up the complete image. For this reason, Klimt constructs the two in separate spaces but places them both at the center of the image—making it necessary to take them both in together and understand them in juxtaposition with one another.

This brings us to the overall construction of the work. *The Three Ages of Life* is broken up into thirds. A dark brown patch intersecting the top and traveling almost completely across the image turns the background into the structure of a cross when the mother and child figure combine with the crone (fig. 1). While this is not an overt statement of crucifixion, it lurks in the background of the image, alluding to the necessary death of the child and the Catholic belief in Eve's guilt in this matter. The crucifixion would not exist without the original sin caused by Eve, and the background cross within Klimt's image would not be complete without the crone/Eve figure. Therefore, visual association between the presence of the crone and the death of the child supports the figure as a representation of Eve and humanity's fall from grace.



A modernist interpretation of the work might further suggest that Klimt sees woman as martyr, or sacrifice, to gender-specific burdens.

The visual similarities and iconographical content of the work suggest strongly that *The Three Ages of Life* is at least linked to the Christian tradition of depicting the Virgin and Christ child, specifically through Byzantine mosaics. Nevertheless, the viewer is still left with the issue of the artist's intent when he completed the work. Did Gustav Klimt consciously construct these allusions to Eve, the Virgin Mary, and Child? While contextualizing the painting within the culture of early twentieth century Vienna gives the viewer a deeper understanding of the way the work would have been received, looking at the artist's personal relationships allows insight into the motivation behind the work's creation.

Many critics focus on the number of affairs Klimt had to perpetuate the idea that the artist merely used women for personal pleasure and gain. However, the few letters between Klimt and Marie Zimmerman (the mother of two of his children and lover from around 1900 until Klimt's death) shows Klimt as tender and communicative.<sup>25</sup> He supported her financially throughout his life while she moved, following the relocation of his studio, to be closer to him while she raised their living son.<sup>26</sup> The letters show the two used pet-names and intimately discussed Klimt's problems, work, and their children—displaying concretely Klimt's aptitude for deep affection and commitment to a single woman.<sup>27</sup> This aptitude for

affection and his willingness to support Zimmerman throughout his life creates a different image of Klimt than that usually portrayed by critics. Here, he is a caring father and devoted lover. One can infer that if the artist had such an emotional connection with Zimmerman and his son (born August 1899), he would have been quite familiar with maternal love and the inherent connection between a mother and child when working on *The Three Ages of Life*.<sup>28</sup>

It is apparent *The Three Ages of Life*, while nominally concerned with the female life cycle, goes beyond this to display maternal affection and relates directly to the Christian tradition of the Virgin and Child. We can be sure of this not only because of Klimt's own experience with maternal love, but also the painting's strong visual connection with the mosaics of Ravenna, iconographical relation to the Virgin, and the cultural context of Vienna at the time of its production. In doing so, Klimt challenges the cultural division between mother and lover—producing a work which shows respect for the female in all ways, and identifies with her plight. This duality negates the critical tendency to see Klimt's work as exclusively prurient, reveals the artist's aptitude for female identification and respect, and begins to construct an image of the Madonna for the modern age.

## ENDNOTES

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# Benno Wissing and the Modernization of de Stijl

Adrian Mascena

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of destruction, innovation, and enormous cultural and social change. Two World Wars had swept across Europe, and revelations in social thought were rising in the wake of the destruction. Many of these revelations and social changes were in direct response to the wars. Numerous 20<sup>th</sup> century artists saw their ideologies crumble and transform before their eyes. Artistic movements, such as Fauvism, Cubism, and other popular late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century styles soon lay tattered at the feet of a war-torn Europe. Other movements, however, withstood the test of time. Instead of abandoning their practices and ideas in favor of newer, more modern notions, artists who subscribed to the tenets of these more fortunate movements found ways to transform and modernize both themselves and their

ideas; in doing so, they were able to keep their art relevant in the ever-changing tides of the 20th century.

One of these movements was de Stijl, a Dutch movement placing emphasis on abstraction, universality, and simplicity, and one such artist was the Dutch graphic designer, Benno Wissing. Through his work as a graphic designer, Wissing was able to alter de Stijl ideas in ways that would come to make de Stijl relevant even in today's society. Wissing accomplished this modernization by transforming de Stijl ideas of simplicity, altering ideas of universality of shapes as a means for world-wide understanding of art, into an idea of universality of shapes that would be used as a means of information dissemination. The changes Wissing made, many of them in response to, or prompted by World War II, were a fundamental step in the evolution of de Stijl, and it is unlikely that many of the changes in ideology Wissing propagated would have come about if the destruction and inevitable reconstruction of World War II had not come to pass.

Benno Wissing, whose art is relatively unknown in America, played a large role in the development of graphic design in the Netherlands. His 1967 designs for Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, and his ideas concerning simplicity and directness can still be seen, mimicked in the modern work of graphic designers primarily in the Netherlands, but world-wide, as well. Wissing's life was not always centered around graphic design; he also experimented with

painting, lithography, and sculpture. Graphic design, however, would prove to be the most fulfilling means of artistic expression for Wissing, who even went as far as to state, "I prefer dealing with nondescript industry than with art..."<sup>1</sup> It is important to examine who Wissing was, and study his experiences as a young artist during World War II, in order to understand fully why he felt that design was the most fulfilling instrument to express his abilities.

Wissing was born in Rankum, Netherlands in 1923. He attended secondary school in Rotterdam from 1936-41 at the Erasmiaans Gymnasium, but did not complete his education there. Wissing himself states, "[my love for classical learning] was largely used up."<sup>2</sup> Upon ending his education at the Gymnasium, Wissing entered the Rotterdam Art Institute, where he dabbled in several artistic media, but was eventually asked not to return in 1943 after he was discovered teaching fellow pupils himself.<sup>3</sup> Throughout 1941-1943, the German *Luftwaffe* were pummeling the city of Rotterdam, determined to break down the city's defenses. The Germans would eventually succeed and begin their occupation of the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> As the war years rolled on, Wissing would eventually flee to France with his good friend, Jan Begeer. While in Paris, the pair was approached with an opportunity to help guide American pilots through the Pyrenees to Spain. Wissing and Begeer accepted, but were eventually shot and wounded by German police in Paris. The two artists were detained only shortly, and let go after questioning. The pair spent the next few months recuperating in a "Mai-

son de Convalescents" in France.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see how this particular World War II experience directly affected Wissing, so much so, in fact, that many of his designs for Dutch apothecaries were based upon his experiences at the convalescent hospital.<sup>6</sup>

Upon his return to Rotterdam during Christmas 1944, Wissing regained contact with many former artist friends. Together, Wissing and this group of fellow Dutch artists discussed, according to author Paul Hefting, "involving artists in the life of the community, thus contributing to the reconstruction effort."

<sup>7</sup> It is now that Wissing began changing his artistic and personal ideologies in response to the events of World War II. Instead of abiding by the mantra, "art for art's sake," Wissing was using art for the purpose of helping the community. In 1949, Wissing began his career as a full-fledged designer, working on catalogues, brochures, museum exhibitions, and posters. He continued working on various design projects until, in 1963, Wissing, along with fellow designers Friso Kramer, Wim Crouwel, and Paul and Dick Schwarz, established the design firm known as "Total Design."<sup>8</sup> It was here at Total Design where Wissing designed and completed some of his most well-known and influential work, including the Schiphol Airport signage and fleet-marking for PAM, a Dutch gas and oil company.<sup>9</sup> Wissing would eventually leave Total Design, fearing the firm was becoming too rigid in their structure, and instead, traveled briefly before moving to Rhode Island in 1980. Here, he completed numerous commissions, and briefly instructed students at the Rhode Island School of

Design.<sup>10</sup> During his time in Rhode Island, Wissing was most notably involved with the 1982 redesigning of the signage at the Rhode Island Department of Transportation bus terminal at Kennedy Plaza in Providence.<sup>11</sup> Wissing's simple, informative designs were as well received here as those which he created in the late sixties, affirming the relevance of his innovations and ideas in the post modern age.

Long before Wissing had lifted his first pencil, de Stijl ideas had already been making their way across Europe. The de Stijl movement began with the Dutchman, Theo van Doesburg, who is described by the art historian, Paul Overy, as a "painter, designer, writer, and propagandist."<sup>12</sup> Though he was indeed the driving force behind the movement, Van Doesburg was among a core group of artists, architects, and designers, which included Piet Mondrian, Bart van der Leek, and Gerrit Rietveld. According to the author Stephen Eskilson, this group of artists and architects felt that many of the troubles leading to World War I involved "nationalist egotism."<sup>13</sup> Eskilson argues that the founders of de Stijl wanted their work to inspire a new, universal language of art, one that focused on geometric abstraction, an abstraction that could not be "identified with any one country or individual."<sup>14</sup> The destruction caused by World War I was a driving force for artists to strive for a style of art that would transcend nationalistic disputes, one that would be meaningful for people of all nationalities.

This, of course, raises the question of "how?" How did this group of artists and architects plan to

find this new universal language of art? They began by breaking down even the most complex figures and ideas into geometric shapes. This geometric reductionism is widely considered to be the first hallmark of the de Stijl movement. Paul Overy explains that other major characteristics include "...an exclusive use of 'orthagonals' (horizontal and vertical lines or 'elements.') and the [use of] 'pigment primary' colors ('pure' red, yellow, and blue), plus the 'neutral' colors or tones (white, grey, and black)."<sup>15</sup> De Stijl, however, was not just a movement of artistic techniques, but, as Overy explains, it was also a movement of "theoretical positions and beliefs."<sup>16</sup> He lists these beliefs, the most important being "an insistence on the social role of art, design, and architecture," and "a belief in a balance between the universal and collective, and the specific and individual."<sup>17</sup> This can be defined as a means for artists to connect their own individual preferences and styles with a larger community by means of an artistic language that could be understood by the populous. If examined, Mondrian's 1942 painting, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* encapsulates the very ideas of de Stijl on canvas. Using the primary colors and linear forms, Mondrian is able to communicate the feelings of excitement and electricity that are present in the New York blocks surrounding Broadway. The larger rectangular areas made up of negative space create the illusion of city blocks, while the linear areas masquerade as streets, the small blocks of interchanging colors representing an electric hum of activity.<sup>18</sup> Even a novice onlooker could recognize Mondrian's geometric patterns as the grid of a large city, which is exactly what Mondri-



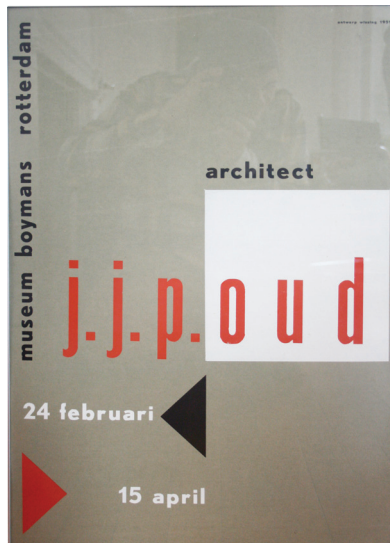


Fig. 1 Benno Wissing, *Poster for J.J.P. Oud Exhibition*, 1951.  
Wissing House, Bristol Rhode Island.  
Photo Courtesy of Jannie Wissing.



Fig. 3 Benno Wissing, *Signage for Schiphol Airport*, 1967.  
Image courtesy of Total Identity and Ben Bos (Wissing Files).



Fig. 2 Benno Wissing, *Signage for Schiphol Airport*, 1967.  
Image courtesy of Total Identity and Ben Bos (Wissing Files).



Fig. 4 Benno Wissing, *Signage for Schiphol Airport*, 1967.  
Image courtesy of Total Identity and Ben Bos (Wissing Files).

an, Van Doesburg, and other de Stijl artists wanted.

De Stijl was unlike many other art movements throughout history in the fact that its members never met to discuss ideas. In fact, the majority of information dissemination came through the journal that Van Doesburg began publishing in 1917.<sup>19</sup> Also called *De Stijl*, the journal made it possible for the various artists involved with de Stijl to share and promote their art with each other. It also allowed the members of the movement to familiarize themselves with de Stijl concepts of typography and graphic design.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the artwork and designs showcased in the journal, it also served as the source of de Stijl philosophy. It is through this journal that de Stijl ideas began to spread throughout the Netherlands, and eventually Europe.<sup>21</sup> In issues of *De Stijl* and other widely shared writings, Van Doesburg writes about the aforementioned de Stijl principles. H.L.C. Jaffé, one of the original de Stijl biographers, cites a Van Doesburg article that states "...art has to express its aesthetical content by its proper, pure means of color and form."<sup>22</sup> The popularity of *De Stijl* steadily increased throughout Europe, and Eskilson explains that in 1921, Van Doesburg and Mondrian "completely redesigned the journal in an attempt to appeal to a broader European audience." Eskilson continues to explain that the journal would now also be published in Paris and Rome, and be printed in several other languages besides Dutch.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that those artists who subscribed to Van Doesburg's ideas took their information pri-

marily from writings provided them with the opportunity for individual interpretation. With Van Doesburg, Mondrian, and other de Stijl artists now voicing their ideas and opinions in the form of a widely published journal, de Stijl artists could easily and readily make small changes to the philosophy of de Stijl in their own art, while still keeping their art in accord with the main foci of the de Stijl movement. One artist could read something of Van Doesburg's one way, while another could take different meaning from it. This led to highly varied de Stijl artwork, and more importantly, gave artists like Benno Wissing the ability to create their art as they saw fit, keeping in mind de Stijl ideology.

Paul Hefting explains that Wissing, unlike Mondrian and Van Doesburg, was extremely hesitant to "write down general ideas on design," for he feared that he would "categorize 'an activity, a progression if you will which more than any other, can also make use of its interdisciplinary role in society.'" <sup>24</sup> Since Wissing's writings concerning his own artistic beliefs are hard to come by, Wissing's commitment to de Stijl must be argued for. Hefting mentions how closely the work carried out by Wissing and Total Design echoes de Stijl.<sup>25</sup> For example, covers for *De Stijl* designed by Piet Mondrian and Van Doesburg and posters designed by Benno Wissing contain striking similarities. Both designs use a limited color palette: orange and black in the case of Van Doesburg, and red, black, and white in the case of Wissing. Large text draws the viewer in, and the smaller text conveys the important information. Also, there is a free use of

vertical text in both designs. The poster designed by Wissing was made for a 1951 exhibition of the de Stijl architect, J. J. P. Oud (fig. 1). In a publication by the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, for which Wissing completed an enormous number of projects, it is explained that Wissing borrowed many techniques from de Stijl in the production of the posters made for Oud's exhibit. These include the use of triangles to capture the viewer's attention and direct the viewer to the dates of the exhibition. Also, when designing postcards for the event, Wissing chose to invoke an "oblong shape," uncommon for him, but probably done "[on the] basis of the de Stijl movement."<sup>26</sup> In these posters, and many more produced by Wissing, he uses only a few colors, and in the case of the Oud posters, only one color, the primary red. Though Wissing was not yet born during de Stijl's heyday, it is very hard to deny that he was not, at the very least, influenced by de Stijl ideology. It is through Wissing's work and the reiteration of this ideology that Wissing modernized these ideas, making them relevant even today.

Wissing's most famous and influential work, and the project that would encapsulate all of his transformative ideas, are his designs for the Schiphol airport (fig. 2). The KLM airport at Schiphol had been badly damaged during the bombings of World War II. The historian Gerald Newton explains that "many of its buildings were destroyed, and the runway [was] left a mass of craters."<sup>27</sup> The need for the airport to be rebuilt was great, and work began quickly. The Architect Kho Liang was asked to de-

sign the buildings, while Wissing was approached about designing the signage. During his research for the new signage, Wissing traveled to many European airports and found their approaches to signage problematic. At Orly Airport in Paris, he found that "the already nervous passengers" were confused by complicated signs and poor choices in building materials.<sup>28</sup> He also found that the materials and "icons" employed by Orly's designers were all different, and that legibility was poor. Wissing wanted the opposite for Schiphol. He wanted passengers to be able to find their way through the enormous space easily. Wissing made clarity his highest priority.<sup>29</sup> With the innovation of the jumbo jet, airports became exponentially larger, making it even more difficult to guide passengers easily and efficiently to their gates.<sup>30</sup> Wissing achieved these goals for simplicity by, as Hefting explains, "[paying] special attention to readability, [using] the most efficient medium for conveying the information (the ceiling), limiting the project to two colors, [and] avoiding frequently confusing pictograms (except the arrow)".<sup>31</sup> Schiphol would subsequently become the basis for many modern airport designs and signage, an achievement for which Wissing receives little or no credit today.<sup>32</sup>

Upon examining Schiphol, we can see the exact ways Wissing modernized the ideas of de Stijl, having done so in response to changes in society induced by World War II. Firstly, the de Stijl insistence on the breaking down of complex forms into simple ones has been translated into a clarified system of pictograms and the sparing use of words (fig. 3). It



is here that Wissing was able to alter the de Stijl desire for a universally understandable language of art, and transform this idea into a desire for a universally understandable way to communicate important information, as a way to direct people of all ethnicities, regardless of their spoken language. In a post-World-War-II world, new information, increased advertising, and the advent of the jumbo jet made the amount of information to which people were subjected in airports nearly unbearable. Wissing found a way to use de Stijl ideas to put travelers and the general public at ease by ensuring that they always knew where they were going, directing them using simple color coding and a variety of only a few shapes to the one out of a hundred gates they needed. Wissing also kept clarity in mind when deciding what typeface to use for the signage. As he had done in previous projects, Wissing chose “Akzidenz Grotesk,” a typeface designed by Berthold in 1896, over the similar Helvetica, a font still widely used today.<sup>33</sup> Wissing’s font selection contributed not only to clarity, but also played a role in keeping travelers calm and directed. None of the letters or numbers come together to form sharp points, and the negative space inside the letters, the inner part of a “C” or the two ovals within the “B,” are rather large and exude a calming lightness. Wissing also ensured that the font could be read from a distance: the letter spacing and contained negative space were likely factors in his decision, as the font can clearly be read from great distances.

Secondly, Wissing maintains de Stijl tradition by using only two colors in his Schiphol designs (fig.

4). In a shift from de Stijl, however, he does not care whether or not green is a primary color, only that using as little color variation as possible provides greater simplicity, readability, and directness. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Wissing took the de Stijl idea of a connection between art and the community, the social aspect of art, to new levels. As previously stated, in the wake of World War II, Wissing wanted to use design to help rebuild the Netherlands. He felt that he could do more for society as a designer than a traditional artist.<sup>34</sup> Gust Romjin, an artist involved with the design group ‘r,’ Wissing’s first design firm, stated, “Rotterdam lay in ruins. On a monumental level there was certainly something for artists to do.”<sup>35</sup> Wissing, like the artists of de Stijl, wanted his work to have social ties. For Van Doesburg and Mondrian, social ties meant that all of society could be brought together through a collectively understood piece of art. Wissing, however, specifically wanted his art to have social ties that would help and benefit the community, to help reconstruct a war-torn Netherlands. No matter if it was at Schiphol or designs for J.J.P. Oud, Wissing wanted his designs to facilitate society at large, whether it be navigating one’s way through an enormous airport, or understanding where and when an event would take place. His ideas of simplicity, clarity, directness and readability tied into this desire to benefit society at large.

Perhaps the best way to extrapolate Wissing’s guiding principles is found in an informational bulletin called *Syllabus Schilderskring*, which was published by ‘r.’ It stated, “The artist must have

something to say which everyone understands; no confusion, no making things difficult.”<sup>36</sup> This quote appropriately ties to the mindset of the de Stijl founders and the ideas by which Wissing produced his designs. In a post-World-War-I world, Mondrian and Van Doesburg sought to use simplicity and abstraction to communicate universal ideas without language or cultural barriers. Wissing, in a post-World-War-II world, sought to use simplicity and directness again to communicate universal ideas without confusion. In this post-modern world, however, Wissing would use these ideas of simplicity and directness to again help members of society digest the increased amount of advertising and information with which we are faced. He did so by making all of his posters, designs, and signage exceptionally readable and clear. Unlike the de Stijl artists, Wissing was relatively disinterested in drawing society into a communal appreciation of his art. Instead, he connected his art to society for the purposes of rebuilding and facilitating society as a whole.

Wissing modernized the ideas of de Stijl through his design work, making concepts of simplicity and universality relevant in a post-World-War-II world. Without his experiences during the War, or the destruction of Rotterdam and the Netherlands, Wissing may not have had the desire or opportunity to use his art in this way. Changes in society induced by World War II such as globalism, the advent of mass media dissemination, increased advertising, and new technologies, coupled with Wissing's own experiences and knowledge of de Stijl, spurred him to

modernize the movement. In the modern era, where attention spans are ever-shrinking and advertising is ever-growing, Benno Wissing's ideas about simplicity, clarity, and directness, are perhaps more relevant now than ever before.

## ENDNOTES

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# Interactivity in the Work of François Morellet

Elizabeth Fitzgerald

The theme of interactivity as a means of activating viewer participation and triggering a dialogue between a work of art and its viewer is a hallmark of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art and can be said to be one of its defining characteristics.<sup>1</sup> The French artist François Morellet is one of the major innovators of the 20th century with regard to interactivity; he made his most significant contributions to the modern and contemporary age with his installations from the 1960s and 70s involving neon tubing, and viewer activated push buttons and levers.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps three of the best examples of this type of work I will examine in this paper: *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur* (1964), *2 trames de tirets 0°-90° avec participation du spectateur* (1971), and *2 trames 45°-135° de néons interférents* (1972).<sup>\*</sup> These works are

grounded in established tools of abstraction, such as simple geometric patterning, the use of unmediated industrial materials, and the application of mathematical and scientific principles onto which Morellet incorporates interactive features.<sup>3</sup> By empowering the viewer, granting him or her the role of facilitator of the completed work, Morellet evokes the emerging social ideals of the 1960s and the beginnings of postmodernism. With an understanding of the history of interactive art, the role of neon in fine art, and the French *avant-garde* art scene, one is able to understand the important place that Morellet's "push button" installations occupy within the modern and contemporary age.

Morellet was born in 1926 in Cholet, France. He began painting in 1945 and had his first solo exhibition in 1950 in Paris. In the early 1950s, Morellet was influenced by the work of de Stijl artist Piet Mondrian and Concrete Abstractionist Max Bill and began producing minimalistic geometric paintings. In 1961, Morellet co-founded GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel) with Yvaral (Jean-Pierre Vassarely), Joël Stein, Francisco Sobrino, Julio Le Parc, and Horacio Garcia Rossi. The members of GRAV collaborated and experimented together until 1968, when they unanimously decided to dissolve. During that seven-year period, Morellet began creating interactive installation pieces and also working with neon tubes. In 1971, Morellet had his first retrospective in the Netherlands, which went on to travel throughout Europe. His work was first exhibited in the United States in 1984 with retrospectives in Buffalo,

Brooklyn, and Miami. Since his debut in 1950, he has had 465 solo shows, the most recent being an exhibition titled “Reinstallations,” which took place at the Centre Pompidou in the Spring of 2011.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his long career, Morellet has consistently worked with geometric forms. Although he has used a variety of media and techniques, he has remained interested in grids, planes, and the arrangement of lines within space. His time with GRAV in the 1960s proved to be a defining period of growth, experimentation, and formation, and the works produced during and immediately following this time were driven by the goal of maximizing viewer participation.

With GRAV, Morellet collaborated with like-minded artists and created labyrinth-like exhibitions composed of installations that challenged the viewer’s physical and visual perception. In addition to viewer participation, members of GRAV experimented with geometry, kinetic energy, and integrated industrial materials into installation pieces. When speaking about GRAV with Alfred Pacquement in 2011, Morellet stated:

I and my friends in the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel had become convinced that the age of painting, of canvases and sculptures had come to an end, over forever. We were passionate about modern materials that hadn’t yet been “polluted” by traditional art. We particularly liked anything that could produce movement

and light.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of coming together as a group of artists to perform visual research experiments with new materials assisted in breaking down the glorified persona of the artist as individual and promoted the sharing of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> This idea of art as research placed GRAV at the forefront of *avant-garde* European art in the 1960s as they sought, in the words of Morellet, “to replace intuition and individualist expression” with “the reason and spirit of systematic research.”<sup>7</sup>

The three works I have chosen to analyze which exemplify this “spirit of systematic research” come from the period of Morellet’s work with GRAV, or from its influence shortly thereafter. The earliest of these, *Reflets dans l’eau déformés par le spectateur* (1964) (fig. 1), involves a simple grid made up of white neon tubes, three horizontal and three vertical, that intersect each other perpendicularly. This grid is reflected into a square basin of dark water that rests on the floor so that when the viewer approaches the work, his or her eyes are focused on the reflection of the grid. The viewer is then invited to interact with this work by moving a lever that will disturb the water and cause the reflection of the grid to fluctuate. As the ripples are sent through the water, the fixed perspective of the viewer is terminated. The viewer is not only participating by physically altering the reflection, but he or she must also interact by thinking about the work in a non-traditional way. Because of the interactive element, the reflection of the grid becomes more

important than the actual grid, itself. The viewer is not standing in front of a static art object, but rather, the moving reflection of that object. In this way, the installation is a paradigmatic example of Morellet's interest in interactivity and kinetic energy in the early years of his neon works.<sup>8</sup> Through the use of industrial materials, he has minimized the trace of the artist's hands, and by incorporating the lever, he has given over primary authorship to the viewer. By moving the lever, the viewer creates his or her own formation of the work and sets the image into motion, which rivals the pre-existing static nature of a traditional painted canvas produced by a single author.<sup>9</sup>

A later work that was completed post-GRAV is *2 trames de tirets 0°-90° avec participation du spectateur* (1971) (fig. 2). This installation incorporates horizontal and vertical white neon tubes that have been arranged and spaced so that some stand alone and others intersect to take on the appearance of crosses or Ts. These tubes have been arranged on two black walls that meet at a right angle, forming a corner. The grid is different from *Reflets* in that the viewer is supplied with buttons that he or she can press in order to light up the tubes. By arranging the tubes on the two intersecting walls, Morellet confronts the viewer with an environment that surrounds him or her. By then placing the control buttons in front of the work, he invites the viewer to create an image at his or her own will that will vary depending on how the buttons are pressed. For example, one button illuminates only the horizontal tubes, creating a composition of floating horizontals, and vice versa. If

the buttons are pressed simultaneously, the full map of horizontals and verticals will be revealed; and if the viewer quickly alternates between the buttons, the tubes seem to be in motion as they appear and disappear at the viewer's command.

The third installation was created in 1972 and is titled *2 trames 45°-135° de néons interférents* (fig. 3). Within this work, the viewer is confronted by a red neon grid system laid out on three walls and a ceiling, so as to create a three-sided cube that surrounds the viewer. The grid is arranged in such a way that the two separate sets of parallel diagonal neon tubes intersecting each other. In front of the viewer, Morellet places two buttons, one attached to each set of parallel tubes, so that the viewer can control the way in which the grid system lights up. Each button, when pressed, causes its individual set of tubes to flash; when the buttons are pressed at random by the viewer, the grid flashes in a "desynchronized beat."<sup>10</sup> Due to the size of this work, the contrast between the dark walls and bright red neon tubes, and the erratic flashing caused by the push buttons, the visual experience can be quite challenging and causes one to blink, squint, or even look away. Much like the *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur* and *2 trames de tirets 0°-90° avec participation du spectateur*, this work utilizes industrial materials in order to remove the presence of Morellet as the "fine" artist. By doing so, and by adding buttons that are controlled by the viewer, Morellet places creative responsibility and ownership into the hands of the viewer. These concepts that were born from the GRAV movement be-

came central themes in Morellet's career, are deeply embedded in postmodernist philosophy, and would serve as an influence for the future of interactive art.

These three examples of interactive installations are useful in distinguishing Morellet from his contemporaries. By incorporating buttons and levers that the viewer can operate, he created a tangible and obvious mode of participation. Not only is the viewer stepping into a three-dimensional environment and being visually stimulated by larger-than-life displays, but he or she is also invited to play the key role of the artist in the creation of the art. Morellet's intention was, and still is, to have each viewer bring his or her own contribution to the work, and thus take part in a visual and interactive exchange, a give-and-take. The works are multi-dimensional and stimulate, distort, and challenge the viewer's perspective. This aspect of Morellet's work is helpful in distinguishing him from other artists who were also working with neon tubing before and during the 1960s and '70s. Although Morellet was not the first to use neon tubing in art, he used it to serve his personal goal of involving the viewer and found it to be the perfect medium with which to translate his grids into interactive installation works.

Neon tubing began with the invention of the Geissler tube in 1857, which consisted of an electrified glass tube filled with rarified gases. In the 1890s, the Geissler design was developed into the Moore tube, a more sophisticated and functional design, and began to be used for commercial light-

ing in the early 1900s. Around this time, a French inventor by the name of Georges Claude began producing industrial neon tubing using a modified version of the Moore design with his own improvements; he displayed these publicly for the first time at an exhibition at the Grand Palais in 1910.<sup>11</sup> In 1923, Claude started his own neon distribution company, "Claude Néon," and provided neon tubing for several European countries and the United States. Claude's design was further developed by French mathematician, Jacques Risler, who discovered that the use of colored florescent tube coatings, called phosphers, would cause the tube to glow with the color of the coating.<sup>12</sup> Although unaware of this at the time, Claude, Risler, and others were creating a medium that would be adapted to fine art as early as the 1920s, and would later become a widely used medium in modern and contemporary art. Czech artist, Zdeněk Pešánek was the first to use neon in his sculptures in the 1920s and '30s and his innovations would lay the groundwork for artists such as Morellet in the 1960s and '70s.<sup>13</sup>

Morellet was certainly conscious that he was not the first to work with the neon medium. He acknowledged the early work of Pešánek and the work of his contemporaries when speaking with Alfred Pacquement in 2011: "I thought that (neon tubes) had never been used in art, as I suppose Martial Raysse and Dan Flavin must have thought, too, in those days, although in fact a great Czech artist, Pešánek, had already used them in the 1920s"<sup>14</sup> Although he was not the first to work with neon tubing,



Morellet's work is distinguished from that of artists like Pešánek, Flavin, and Raysse in that he incorporated interactivity, and specifically, the push button system, which enabled a high level of viewer participation. On an aesthetic level, the medium of neon for Morellet was a key component in his interactive installations because of the level of brightness and color that makes these works highly engaging; on a conceptual level, because of the industrial nature and the lack of involvement of the artist; and on a directly interactive level, because the tubes could be easily switched on and off by the viewer. Morellet's desire to use neon was not revolutionary for his time, but the way in which he applied the medium stands as a mark of his innovation.

With regard to light art, it is important to acknowledge another predecessor and possible influence of Morellet's: László Moholy-Nagy, a founder of the Bauhaus and an innovator in the use of industrial materials in fine art. Moholy-Nagy created the *Light-Space Modulator* (1921-30), which is considered to be the "first electrically powered sculpture that emitted light."<sup>15</sup> He saw this work as an example of constructivism and was interested in depicting light in motion.<sup>16</sup> In this way, Moholy-Nagy was a forerunner of the ideas that would be articulated by GRAV in the years to come. He saw his art production as an experiment that was aimed at a goal, for example, creating an environment using light. The practices of Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus assisted in the breakdown of traditional fine art work and encouraged the scientific approach to art production that would

come to fruition in the 1960s with the work of Morellet and others.

Another element of Morellet's work that encourages viewer participation is the use of installation. The role of the viewer in relation to art was radically changed with the concept of installation art. Beginning in the early twentieth century with artists such as El Lissitzky, Kurt Schwitters, and Marcel Duchamp, installation art focused on the experience of the viewer as a key part of the work. By surrounding the viewer with a three-dimensional environment, an installation piece forces the viewer to interact as a participant; thus, as art historian Claire Bishop explains, installation art both "activates" and "decentralizes" the viewer's position.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of an installation is to make the viewer think about the space he or she has entered and how he or she experiences this space physically, optically, emotionally, etc.<sup>18</sup> These are all ideas that influenced Morellet, as he explained in an interview with Pacquement in the spring of 2011, "Artworks are picnic areas, places where you take potluck, consuming whatever you've brought along. Pure Art, Art for Art's Sake, is there to express nothing (or everything)."<sup>19</sup> Morellet intends the viewer to give motion and meaning to the works and therefore, his interactive installations literally depend on the participation of the viewer.

The shift from canvas to installation was most specifically made in the 1960s and '70s by artists in movements such as Pop Art, Minimalism, and Op Art, who expressed a lack of interest and a loss of



faith in traditional painting on canvas.<sup>20</sup> While a reaction to the resounding achievements of the Abstract Expressionists and their monumental canvasses, this general feeling within the artistic community coincided with the social initiative of focusing on the collective whole and de-emphasizing the individual.<sup>21</sup> In the wake of WWII, particularly in Europe, many artists sought to break down artist-viewer hierarchy in their work and did so by removing the mark of the artist and sharing authorship with the viewer. Many contemporary artists believed this to be a personal mission; that if art failed to involve the viewer, the artist was taking a role of power and thus denying equality with the viewer.<sup>22</sup> This social trend came to be known as postmodernism, and the art from this time serves as a visual example of the postmodern theory that would come to fruition amidst the social revolutions of the 1960s. Postmodern theorists Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner state that postmodernism:

...rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, post-modern theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentred and fragmented subject.<sup>23</sup>

Morellet's interactive installations resonate with these postmodern ideals in that they are able to be inter-

preted by anyone (and everyone) and there is no hierarchic mark of the artist's individual self-expression or achievement. The artist's role is diminished and the viewer becomes the subject and author of the work; therefore, the work takes on a different meaning each time it is activated by a new viewer. When one of Morellet's interactive works is on display, each of the participants who takes on the role of the artist in creating a visual landscape has a different visual, intellectual, social, and emotional experience with the work. The interactive works lack a singular meaning and the artist-viewer hierarchy, and thus serve as paradigmatic examples of postmodern reactions to modernism.

In the works *Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur*, *2 trames de tirets 0°-90° avec participation du spectateur*, and *2 trames 45°-135° de néons interférents*, Morellet has applied simple, straightforward titles that explain the interactive role of the viewer. In English, these three titles translate to: *Reflections in water distorted by the spectator*, *2 grids of dashes 0°-90° with the spectator's participation*, and *2 grids 45°-135° of interfering neons*. Each title gives an idea of what is physically presented, and no further emotional or conceptual information. Although the words "distorted" and "interfering" may seem to give a negative connotation to the viewer's interaction, Morellet's approach to meanings and titles at this time of his life suggests that these words were simply selected in order to imply the interactive quality of the works. In a statement from the early 1990s, Morellet comments: "my first 'electric

works'... are more or less guaranteed to be without transcendence; they neither glorify God nor the electricity fairy, and only touched upon sciences of the future."<sup>24</sup> There are no deeper spiritual meanings or complex explanations to these works: they are simply meant to be interacted with and given fresh meaning by each new viewer and the theme of interactivity is, thus, the ultimate goal. With the major developments of French postmodern theory emerging in the 1970s, it can be said that Morellet's work served as a visual aid to these postmodern theories and postmodernism as a whole.

Morellet's innovations are not only relevant for the 1960s and 1970s, but also for the years that followed. Art Historian Lynn Zelevansky wrote, "a few (artists), like François Morellet, did more than simply anticipate art tendencies of the 1960s and 1970s; they created the artistic approach and environment that allowed them to flourish."<sup>25</sup> The spirit of visual research that was a driving force behind Morellet's work during the time of GRAV provided the environment for new methods of creating and viewing art that would affect artists in the years to follow. As art progressed from the 1970s and into the twenty-first century, artists continued to apply technology and radical forms of interaction in order to involve the viewer further and hand over authorship. Morellet must be counted as an innovator and pioneer of his time and his interactive neon installations serve as the most profound examples of his innovation. At the time of these installations, Morellet stated that his visual research was "faith in progress, the demystifi-

cation of art, systematic experimentation, a step towards a science of art, the ultimate hope."<sup>26</sup> Rooted in modern trends, and exuding the ideals of postmodernism, Morellet's interactive neon works show the importance of the theme of interactivity in modern and contemporary art, and Morellet's importance to this theme.

## ENDNOTES

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\*Photography credits for these images were not available, please see [http://www.centrepompidou.fr/Pompidou/Communication.nsf/docs/ID27CE43433358105AC12577CA0037AFD6/\\$File/20110225\\_DP\\_FrancoisMorellet\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.centrepompidou.fr/Pompidou/Communication.nsf/docs/ID27CE43433358105AC12577CA0037AFD6/$File/20110225_DP_FrancoisMorellet_ENG.pdf) Pages 9 and 10:

*Reflets dans l'eau déformés par le spectateur*

*2 trames de tirets 0°-90° avec participation du spectateur*

*2 trames de tirets 45°-135° de néons interférents*



**STUDIO ART**



# Avalanche Vocals

Megan Costello

Throughout my studies of photojournalism, I have developed a strong interest in documentary photography. *Avalanche Vocals* contains street photographs of people I happened upon by chance. These images were created while I was living in Italy and France this past fall. As a foreigner to the lands, I wanted to understand the identity of the native people. I found that much like the United States, France and Italy have a collage of identities and cultures. As a result, I decided to use street photography as a method of understanding the concept of individual identity. I found that the identity of strangers is difficult to define. Identity is a blend of unlimited characteristics and is often our own projection of ideas and cultural values onto a person.

I shot these photographs using a 55mm lens that forced me to get close to my subjects. In doing so, there was an inevitable interaction between the subject and myself. I realized that as a photographer, what I imagined to be my subject's identity was in part a projection of what I wanted it to be. Therefore, these images are in a way my own interpretation of who these people are. The only thing I know for certain about my photographic subjects is the circumstance in which our paths crossed.

The photographic works of Mary Ellen Mark inspired my interest in street photography. Her images never cease to evoke a sense of mystery despite the information she often provides about the photographic subjects. In this collection, I strive to capture the same mystery, in which the subject's identity is uncertain and ever changing through the eyes of the viewer.





*The Confrontation*  
Digital photograph



*The Things We Remember*  
Digital photograph





*Untitled*  
Digital photograph



*When I Was Young*  
Digital photograph



# One Face

Blair Rohan

Faces are the most recognizable part of the human body. With the exception of identical twins, no two people have the same face. But while we all have unique features, there are universally common characteristics of the human face. After all, everyone has a nose, mouth, and eyes. In my work, I want to emphasize that when completely different faces are superimposed, they can form one coherent face. By using short brushstrokes and different colors for each portrait, I am able to make all the features on the face of four different portraits become one facial appearance. The four different portraits that are combined are similar in gender and age so that the superimposed face is easier to make out. The faces do however come from all different races. If you look closely at each piece, the traces of the four different portraits can all be seen.

My idea was inspired by first doing portrait collages using pieces of magazine paper. After looking at other artists' portrait collages, like Picasso's, I was intrigued by how different pieces of images can come together to form a new image. Though my original portraits all have different features and facial expressions, when I place them together they make their own unique portrait. Looking at these works, I want a viewer to recognize that though we all have unique exteriors, we really look more alike than we think. I want these superimposed pieces to express the similarity between the people around us, regardless of their differences in features.





*Untitled*  
24" x 23.5"  
Digital fine art print





*Untitled*  
24" x 23.5"  
Digital fine art print



*Untitled*  
24" x 23.5"  
Digital fine art print





*Untitled*  
24" x 23.5"  
Digital fine art print



# Systems

Caroline Morgan

Every place around the world that is visible to us fits within a system. In my work I use elements of landscape and architecture as starting points in the project of mapping space. I see all the components of the external world installed together like a three-dimensional puzzle. In analyzing the world, I am trying to simplify it into its essential parts and then re-complicate it through formal and material choices in my work. I take inputs from the natural world and transform them into a new fragmented surface of abstract shapes, textures, and mysterious breaks in perspectives.

I intend for a viewer to sense the presence of the landscape in my work, but to be thrown off by the abnormalities. I want my paintings to sustain interest over a long period, slowly revealing the small-scale worlds and multiple perspectives that exist within the structure of the whole painting. These elements of mystery are intended to keep the viewer caught in a state of questioning: what kind of space is this? What is happening within this environment? Approaching the work, the audience hovers between the familiar and the other-worldly. What is viewed or interpreted is an experience within itself and can be determined by the audience every time these paintings are studied.



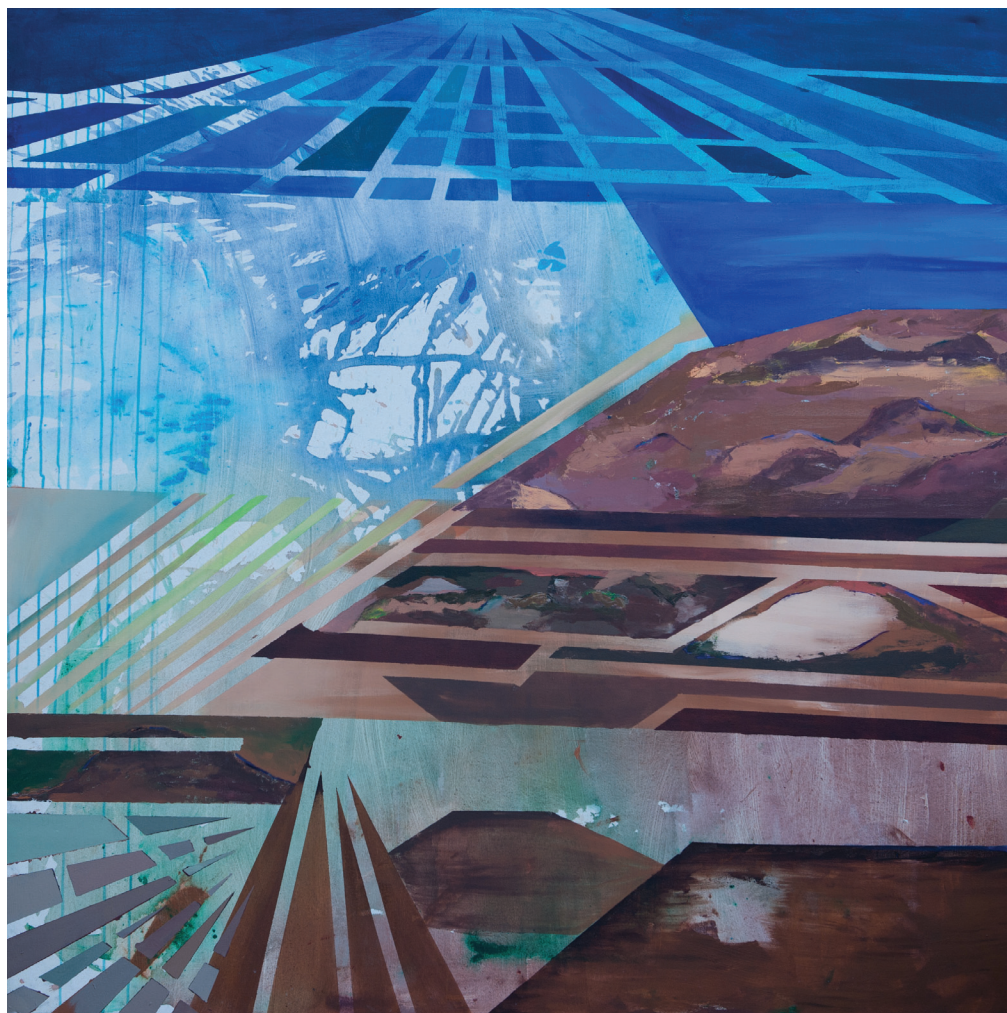
*Hills*  
60" x60"  
Acrylic on canvas





*Kauai*  
72" x 72"  
Acrylic on canvas





*Colorado River part I*  
72" x 72"  
Acrylic on canvas



*Colorado River part II*  
36" x 72"  
Acrylic on canvas



# Fog Emotion

Amanda Dailey

My bodies of work are mental stepping-stones towards an intrapersonal discovery. I am in pursuit of understanding the seemingly endless psychological chaos unraveling inside my mind. These images are highly personal conceptual representations that aim to demonstrate the strains of separation anxiety, and the physical and psychological changes of pregnancy. They are abstract enough to encourage individual interpretation, while still allowing the viewer access to the window of my mind and body. By choosing and combining images that are individually strong, I am able to create pieces that are emotionally complex and powerful.





*Untitled*  
Digital photograph





*Untitled*  
Digital photograph



*Untitled*  
Digital photograph





*Untitled*  
Digital photograph



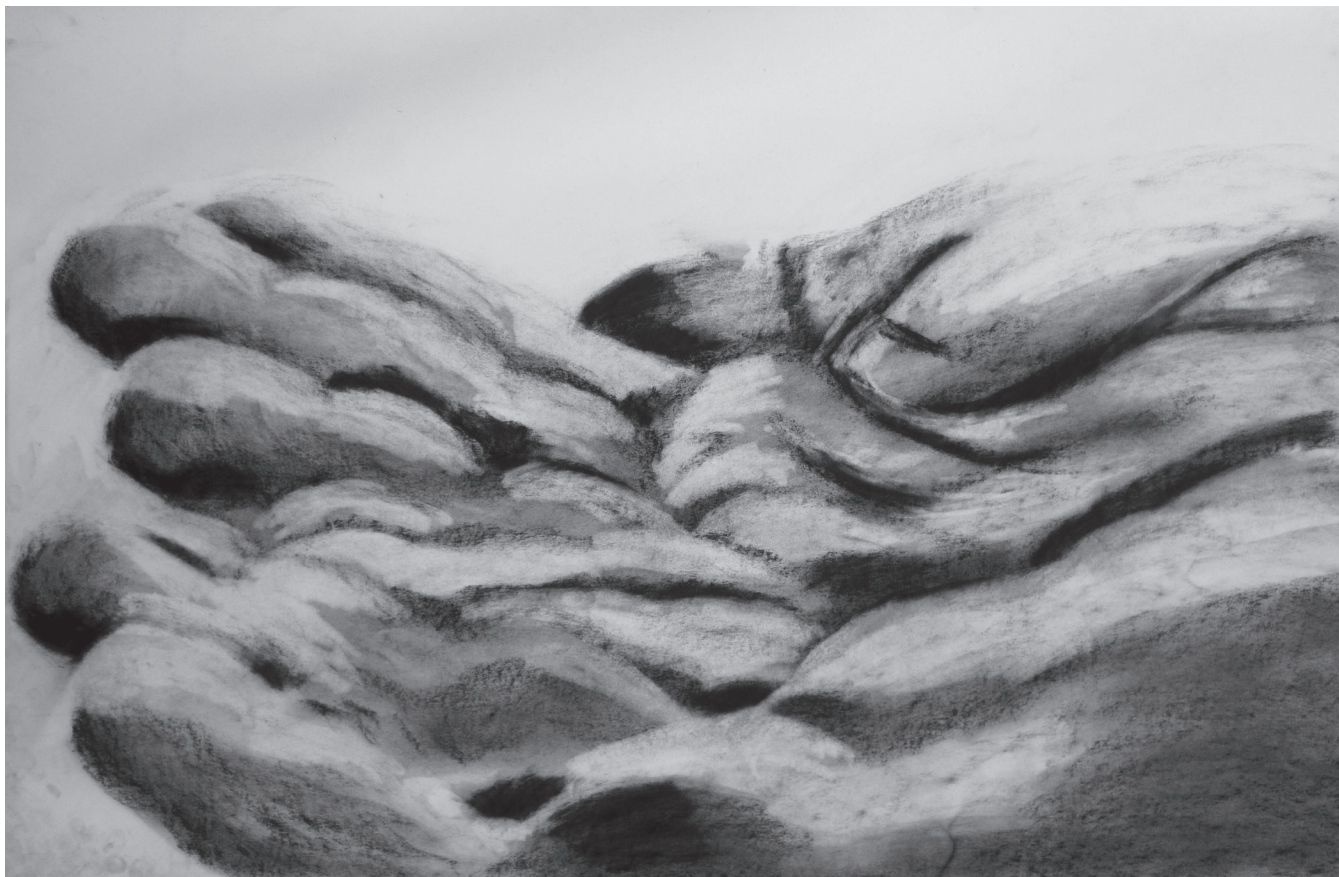
# In the Palm of His Hands

Shana Kakareka

In my work, I explore a topic that generates a never-ending series of questions for me: my faith. People hold so many various personal beliefs according to their faith. For one to believe so strongly in something and be able to place all of their trust in their faith when they have no certainty is fascinating. One message that I connect with immensely in my faith was delivered to me through a song called “On Eagles’ Wings.” This song resonates with me because it reminds me that even though unexpected things happen in life, God is always watching over and holding me in the palm of His hands.

Through my faith, I have come to realize that I cannot live according to my own plan that I imagine in my head, but rather live by what God has planned for me. In this way, I am placing my life in His hands. We have no control over what is in store for us, so it is better to let go and let God. I feel a sense of protection in His hands. Drawing these hands in my works larger than life symbolizes the strength and power that the almighty God embodies. They are gentle yet strong. I chose to give the hands a sculpture-like appearance as if I could feel the power in His hands. I feel comfort knowing that God has a plan for each one of us.

My work is made using the simple drawing materials of paper and charcoal. When I work, I touch the paper directly with my hands and use charcoal as my eleventh finger. Having hand-on-paper contact allows me to dive directly into the drawing and transfer the image in my head onto the surface. I leave a trace of myself through the fingerprint marks in the charcoal. I aim to elicit an emotional response from viewers with my drawings; if a viewer can connect an aspect of the drawing with something in his or her own life, and if this results in an emotional shift, then I have succeeded.



*Hands I*  
25" x 35"  
Charcoal on paper





*Hands II*  
25" x 35"  
Charcoal on paper



*Hands III*  
25" x 35"  
Charcoal on paper



*Hands IV*  
25" x 35"  
Charcoal on paper





# Eye Witness

Elise Costello

Ballet is my passion. Through the movements of dance, my body and mind can become one. In this state, the actions are performed with muscle memory; there is almost a mindlessness that all athletes have to maintain in order to be able to lose themselves to movement.

My project allows me to fully understand what goes on in this semi-mindless state, and allows me to analyze it intellectually outside the arena of performance. I use a high-speed camera to capture and isolate the steps involved in each movement. I can use the images to study the particular muscles and motions that the body goes through in carrying out these everyday actions: these movements that are critical for developing the strength, stability and gracefulness dancers require.

One of my important antecedents is Eadweard Muybridge, who used photography to capture certain human and animal movements that are imperceptible to the unassisted eye. I am photographing myself in order to better understand how my body works in performing the actions of a dancer. My work explores the labor that goes into making ballet look effortless; at the same time, some of the movements that I have photographed are ones we all perform daily. I want the viewer to connect personally to the universal actions I photograph, while also understanding the intricacy of the dance movements I have explored.



*Rise*  
Digital photograph



*Eye Open*  
Digital photograph



*Hair*  
Digital photograph





*Back*  
Digital photograph





# Connotations:

## *An Exploration of iPhoneography*

Justine Harrington

Language is the most systemized and direct method of human expression; it is the medium by which groups and individuals convey, communicate and understand. We most directly and effectively reveal our identity through sharing language with others.

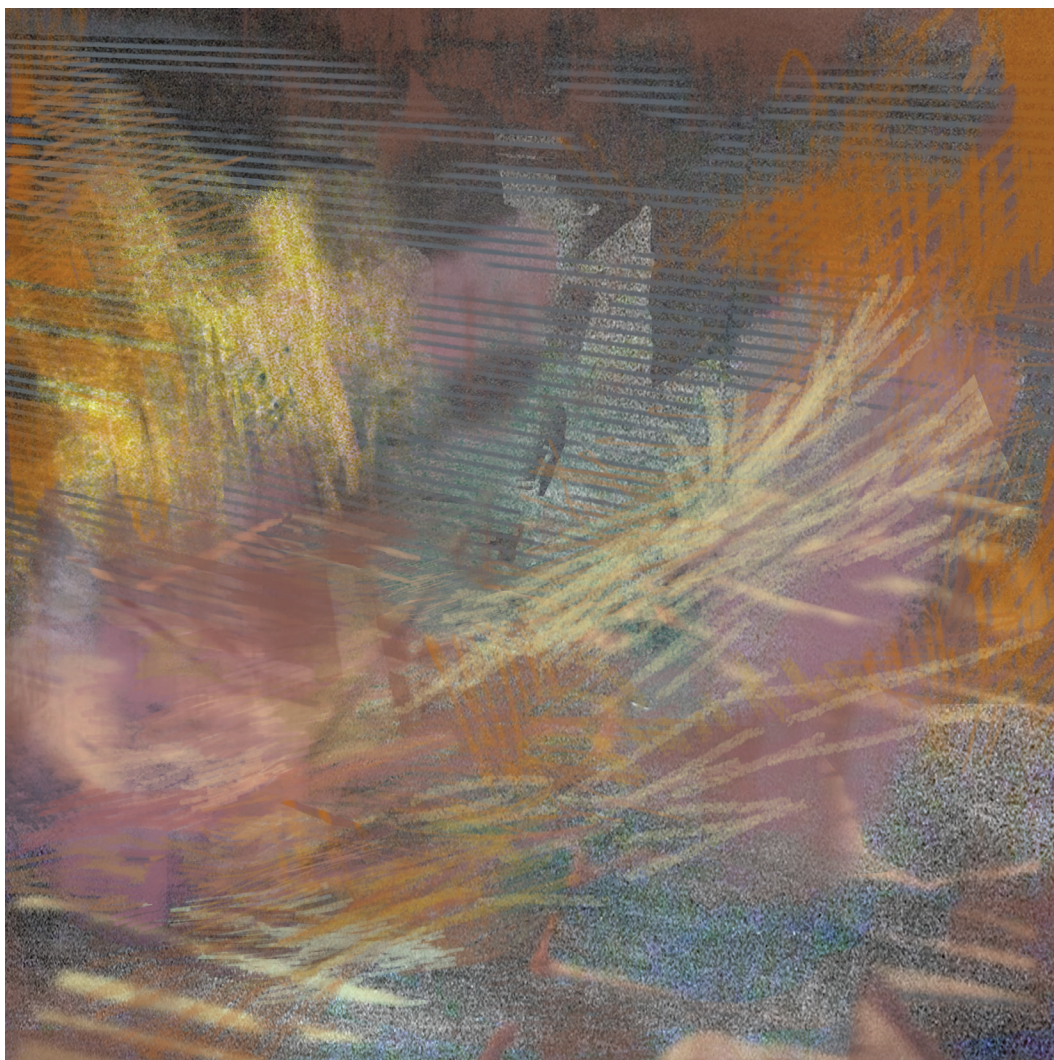
A similar situation exists in the expressive function of visual imagery. Much of my work abstracts and interprets the nature of objective reality, notably in visual relationships between space, lines and edges. I think of my artworks as extensions of a distinct visual language, and the vocabulary by which I abstract and compose is communicated in a systemized manner similar to language forms.

*Connotations* has been an ongoing pursuit of discovering images from the camera on my iPhone. This was an unpretentious pursuit, concentrating less on the technology that inspired the images and more on defining my own vision when expressing a personal composition. Using the mobility of the iPhone as a means for visual journaling, I realized subtle visual patterns surfacing in the process of collecting hundreds of images. A certain vocabulary of personal taste was developing. Images that most strongly reinforced this opinion were then extrapolated upon through a process of digitally drawing and manipulating colors, textures and forms to more clearly define my personal taste. In order to distinguish my own visual identity from the influence of the technology, I insisted that my own thought process manually manipulate the original images, rather than an algorithm or filter predetermined by a computer or phone application.

My work aims to loosen the literal interpretation of imagery in order to challenge the viewer's mind to see beyond the physicality of the subject matter and explore a more expressive and conceptual approach to composition, whether in art or language. By focusing on banal and commonplace snapshots of life, I aspire to provoke the viewer to notice the communicative power of the formal relationships within an image, so that they too may analyze preconceived notions about their own reality by understanding different vocabularies and methods of communication.



*Curtain*  
Digital fine art print



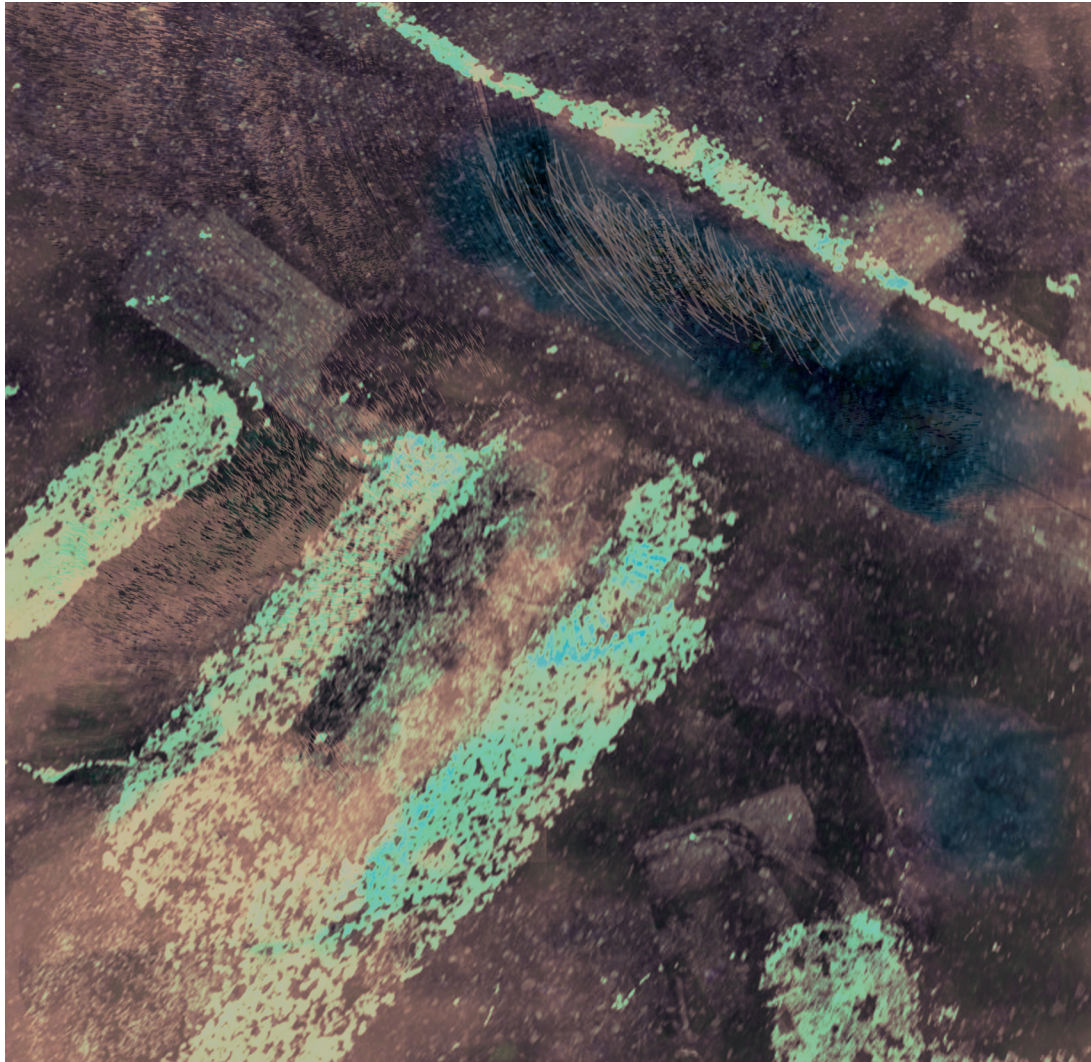
*Midnight Concrete*  
Digital fine art print





*Sidewalk*  
Digital fine art print





*Street Inscriptions*  
Digital fine art print



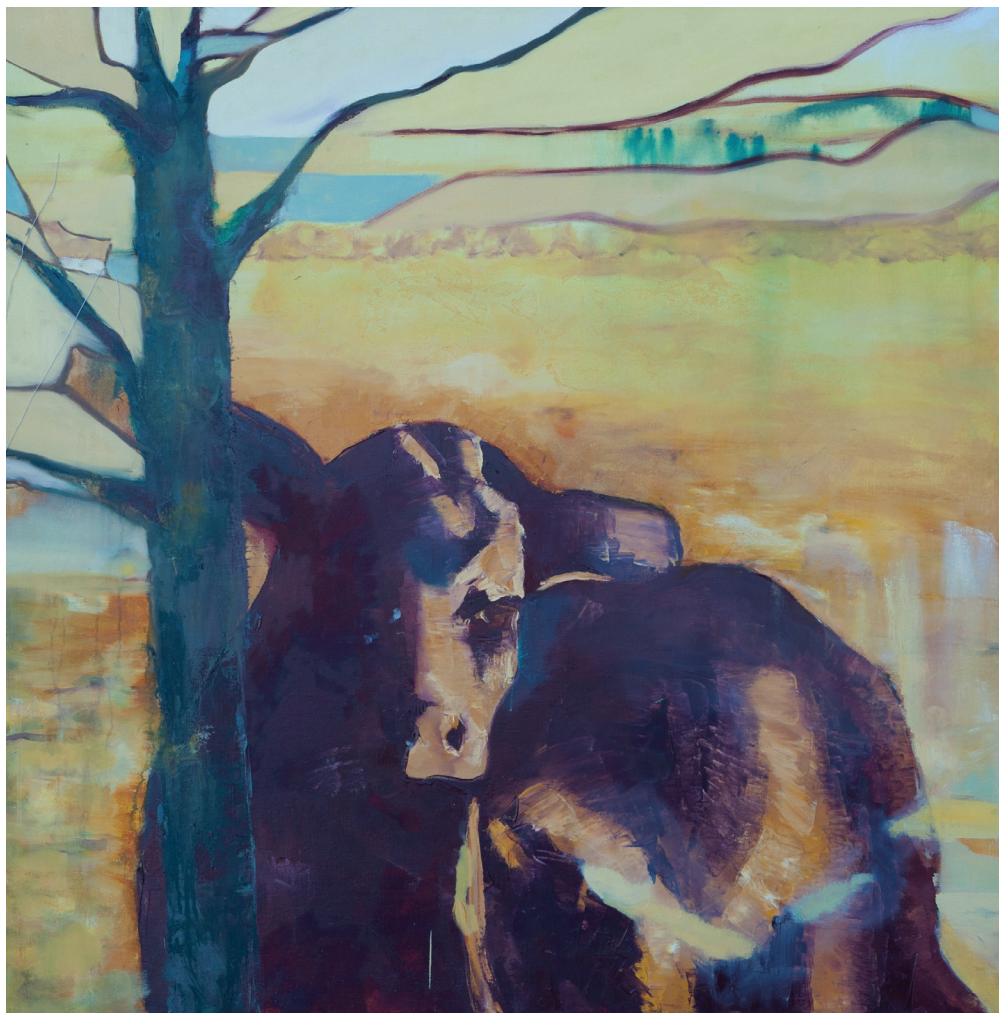
# On the Other Side

Nathalie Coughlin

It is human nature to want to live in an ordered world and to organize our lives through plans and rules. We tend to find security in routines and like creatures of habit we rarely stray outside of our comfort zones.

My work deals with creating a sense of dislocation to take our statically ordered worlds and contort them slightly. The cows and organic shapes in my paintings are supposed to elicit the feeling of a connection with the viewer. The fences, rock walls, and other physical barriers are a formal choice to present this dislocation. Metaphorically, the barriers in the paintings become a symbol of various interruptions in our lives.

In my manipulation of paint both in color and form I create areas of overlap, where the viewer is unable to tell what is in front or what is behind. I aim for these slight moments of dislocation and tension in space to create confusion, arouse curiosity, and invoke excitement in a viewer. It is a way to diverge from the daily banalities and observe a more stimulating space.



*October 23<sup>rd</sup>*  
44" x 44"  
Oil on canvas





*Kellie Jean*  
44" x 44"  
Oil on canvas





*June*  
36" x 42"  
Oil on canvas



*March*  
44" x 44"  
Oil on canvas



# Pennsylvania Noir

Bridget Reed

Distant vestiges of memory incite my art making. By examining my biographical past through various scopes, I can extract key memory perceptions for further investigation.

In my work, I physically construct models of memories to correlate to the mental process of memory reconstruction. The very nature of memory is devoid of a logical progression or stability. Imagery loses clarity, moving in and out of our consciousness. The memories often become muddled creating passages that can be fleshed out by intuitive impulses. Therefore, the structure is built to contain the fleeting memories so I can extract meaning from them. Individually crafting all aspects of a memory in multiple dimensions unearths intricacy and produces a complex and rich narrative.

Photographing the models as the final step alters the scale and flattens the image, creating a documentation of reality. The viewer must then question the origins of the imagery presented and draw conclusions about its purpose. The use of photography in this instance also functions as film. The images are presented as fragments of a larger scope of memory that has no definitive beginning or end, and the use of a film still draws focus to a particular moment in the elapsing of a memory. The photographs are informed by the history of film, particularly Film Noir and French New Wave—those references are synchronized with corresponding film theories that determine my technical choices in composing the shots. For example, the French New Wave upset the traditional conventions of story-telling in order to access a new facet of reality. I deviate from a linear narrative and instead favor upsetting the chronology of memory. I create a new dimension of reality by allowing a singular memory to converse and interact with historical and cultural narratives.

Through this process of visual reconstruction, a unique perspective of realism is crafted. This new realism functions to revive and reinterpret the dormant memories of my childhood in Pennsylvania to contemplate their contemporary meaning.



*Shelf Life of a Mallard*  
Digital photograph





*The Vicmead Hunt*  
Digital photograph



*10 Crawford Circle*  
Digital photograph



*Wyeth's Haskell Chairs*  
Digital photograph







