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A PERSPECTIVE ON THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN PAINTING: JUDITH AND SALOME AS ICONOGRAPHIC FIGURES

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Özet

Sanat tarihinde kadın imgeleri, toplumsal normlar, ekonomik yapılar ve inanç sistemlerindeki dönüşümler doğrultusunda sürekli yeniden inşa edilmiştir. Bu bağlamda, Eski Ahit anlatılarından Yudit ve Salome figürleri, kadına dair ikili temsillerin simgesel örnekleri olarak öne çıkar. Yudit, yüceltilen kahraman kadın modelini temsil ederken; Salome, ahlaki yozlaşmanın ve tehlikenin cisimleşmiş hâlidir. Her iki figürün sanat yapıtlarında ele alınış biçimi, kadına yönelik ataerkil bakışın ve ideolojik kodların görsel düzlemde nasıl üretildiğini gösterir. Mitolojik ve ikonografik anlatıların toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği perspektifiyle yeniden değerlendirilmesi, mevcut yapının sorgulanması ve dönüştürülmesi açısından önem taşımaktadır. Bu çalışmada, söz konusu ikonografik temsillerin tarihsel bağlamda çözümlenmesiyle, sanatın toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin inşasındaki rolü tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın Temsili, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, İkonografi, Yudith, Salome

RESİMDE KADIN TEMSİLİNE BAKIŞ: İKONOGAFİK FİGÜRLER OLARAK YUDİTH VE SALOME

Abstract

Throughout art history, representations of women have been continuously reconstructed in line with shifting social norms, economic structures, and belief systems. In this context, the Old Testament figures Judith and Salome emerge as symbolic examples of dual representations of femininity. While Judith embodies the idealized, heroic female figure, Salome represents moral corruption and danger. The ways in which these figures are portrayed in artworks reveal how patriarchal perspectives and ideological codes are visually constructed. Re-evaluating mythological and iconographic narratives through the lens of gender equality is crucial for questioning and transforming existing structures. This study analyzes the historical context of these iconographic representations and discusses the role of art in shaping gender roles.

Keywords: Female Representation, Gender, Iconography, Judith, Salome

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Giriş

Throughout history, woman has emerged as an indispensable artistic image in every era, constantly reinterpreted in countless forms, styles, and contexts. These depictions, ranging from classical representations to contemporary approaches, reflect not only artistic tendencies but also the socio-cultural dynamics of the period—such as women's societal roles, economic structures, and religious or cultural norms. Female imagery plays a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions of women by reflecting the worldview of the culture it belongs to (Berktay, 2019). For instance, in prehistoric societies that transitioned to an agriculture-based economy, the central role of women in life led to the emergence of a matriarchal family structure, where lineage was traced through the female line (Timuçin, 1992).

The earliest representations of women, dating back to prehistoric times, were shaped by a strong belief in a mother goddess. As Joseph Campbell (2020) notes, with the development of plant cultivation and animal domestication, social authority shifted from men to women in the biological equation. As hunting was replaced by the nurturing role of women in agriculture, the female figure became a symbol of fertility, productivity, and abundance. In this context, feminine images shaped around the Mother Goddess cult were portrayed as dominant over nature and sustaining life.

In the geography we inhabit, there are numerous prehistoric artifacts bearing traces of such imagery. The most well-known among them is the Mother Goddess figurine found in Çatalhöyük. With her full-bodied form symbolizing fertility, the figure is depicted flanked by two lions—whose tails curl around her shoulders—emphasizing her dominance over nature. She is portrayed in the act of giving birth, with the head of a newborn figure visible between her legs (Figure 1). This scene represents the presence of a powerful maternal figure, identified with the fertility of nature.

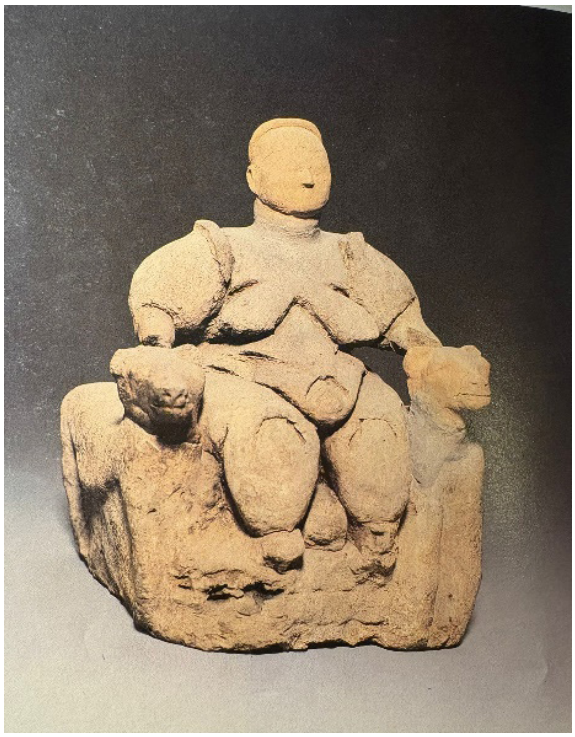


Figure 1: Mother Goddess Figurine, first half of the 6th millennium BCE, terracotta, Çatalhöyük. Source: Kulaçoğlu, 1992.

Although belief systems have changed over time, newly emerging goddesses have continued to bear traces of the ancient Mother Goddess cult. These figures appear to share the powers and functions of the Mother Goddess over nature. Each can be interpreted as a transformed variation within different cultural contexts. Thus, the female image, in the form of the goddess, has been reproduced in various ways throughout history, becoming an indispensable motif in both art and mythology.

The Transformation of the Female Image and Its Relationship with the Patriarchal System

Over the course of history, beginning with the earliest works of art, the evolving perception of women has brought about a transformation in female imagery—one that has become increasingly visible in artistic productions. These images, distilled from the collective memory of humanity, offer important insights into the eras they belong to through the artistic depictions of the female body. While the archetypal features of the Mother Goddess figure from the archaic period have endured, shifts in artistic style and aesthetic understanding over time have led to new interpretations of these images. Representations of women have been continually reconfigured to align with the social structures of each period and have been reshaped in parallel with changes in women's societal positions.

At the root of this transformation lies the transition of economic power into the hands of patriarchal authority. In matriarchal societies centered around agricultural production, women held clear economic and social power; however, with the development of animal husbandry and the transfer of property ownership to men, women were incorporated into this system of ownership. According to Hançerlioğlu (2001), during this transition, men sought assurance that lineage continued through their own bloodline, leading to the institutionalization of monogamous marriage. Women were confined to the domestic sphere and brought under control—thus establishing a lasting relationship of ownership and surveillance over them.

As Berger strikingly states, "To be born a woman is to be born within an allotted and confined space owned by men" (2002, 46). Within a system where men define the roles and spaces in which women are allowed to exist, the emergence of monotheistic religions further reinforced this control by providing it with religious legitimacy. Berktay (2019) emphasizes that monotheistic religions are closely tied to a specific historical-social "moment," and these structures share common characteristics in determining the social status of women.

The patriarchal social structure, in which men dominate over women, legitimized this controlling attitude and became embedded within the social, economic, and cultural systems. This system has been reinforced by assumptions that portray male superiority as a natural and inevitable reality. While women were defined as weak, emotional, and irrational, men were positioned as strong, rational, and authoritative (Berktay, 2019). In antiquity, physicians and philosophers described the female body as incomplete, cold, and moist—associating its biological features with deficiency and inferiority (Sagaert, 2017). Although modern scientific studies have since disproven these claims, the cultural legacy of such prejudices continues to influence perceptions of women in contemporary society.

Le Goff (2015, 314) notes that in the male-dominated and militaristic structure of medieval society, fertility was not regarded as a divine blessing but rather as a curse, and as a result, women were not considered respectable beings. In Christian belief, a woman's fertility and sexuality were seen as burdens of great responsibility, which in turn further intensified the moral scrutiny directed at her. The female image gained value only insofar as it conformed to the patriarchal system's idealized standards of beauty. This form of beauty was often reduced to physical allure and frequently associated with seduction—thus rendering it dangerous.

In Ancient Greece, the ideal woman was expected to be silent, obedient, and discreet (Sagaert, 2017). This mindset is powerfully echoed in the lines of Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet: "…and the women who died as if they had never lived, whose place at our table came after the ox." In the fine arts as well, the female image was often idealized to appeal to the male gaze. Representations of women derived from religious sources were frequently shaped to convey the ideological messages of a patriarchal system. Figures such as Eve, Delilah, Salome, and Potiphar's wife represent archetypes of morally weak, seductive women who use their sexuality in dangerous ways.

In contrast, figures like the Virgin Mary, Judith, Susanna, and Mary Magdalene embody the "virtuous" women endorsed by the patriarchal order. These figures have been repeatedly depicted in European visual arts and were often interpreted in line with the ideological expectations of religious institutions (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Left: Depiction of Adam and Eve by a Flemish miniaturist, from the Grimani Breviary, c. 1510
Right: The Granduca Madonna by Raffaello Sanzio, 1504, Uffizi Gallery.

In art history, the ideal representation of women has been reproduced in similar forms throughout the ages. For instance, the Aphrodite sculpture by the Ancient Greek sculptor Praxiteles greatly influenced the aesthetic understanding of Renaissance artists. The female body was idealized and depicted in accordance with ancient aesthetic norms. In this way, a standardized conception of beauty—defined by the physical features of women—became one of the dominant themes in artistic production.

In the process of social construction, narratives developed around the image of woman have created "ideal woman" typologies within the boundaries defined by the male gaze. These narratives determine which female figures are validated or excluded by the patriarchal system. Even today, it is evident that these gender-based stereotypes continue to exert influence.

In this context, Onat's (2023) study on American cinema offers a critical perspective on female representation through the concepts of femme fatale and femme vitale. The femme fatale character of film noir—seductive, dangerous, and one who leads the male protagonist astray—reflects men's fear of women and the hostility born of that fear. In contrast, the femme vitale represents a more traditional, domestic, and morally upright type of woman who remains largely invisible. Onat notes that when the virtuous qualities attributed to women align with masculine traits, such women gain agency and become subjects in their own right.

In the context of historical and cultural representations, the figures of Salome and Judith, as recounted in the Old Testament, serve as notable examples of this dual female representation. One is portrayed as seductive and dangerous; the other as brave and virtuous. Their depictions in European painting offer meaningful examples that can be analyzed through the binary of femme fatale and femme vitale. At this point, it is worthwhile to turn to the religious texts and examine the stories of Salome and Judith more closely.

Judith and Salome: The Origins of Two Opposing Female Archetypes in Sacred Texts

The Book of Judith, one of the apocryphal texts, highlights the courage and faith of Judith, a heroic female figure within Jewish tradition (Tükel and Yüzgüller, 2014). In Chapter Eight of the text, Judith's genealogy is presented in detail. This extensive lineage reflects the patriarchal structure of the society by explicitly showing that ancestry is traced from father to son: "Judith was the daughter of Merari… and Sarasadai was the son of Israel." (Holy Bible). Although Judith is portrayed as a beautiful woman from a wealthy and noble family who was widowed at a young age, her true value lies in her devotion to God and her pious lifestyle. After the death of her husband, she leads a modest and ascetic life, earning the respect of the community through her humility and restraint. Judith thus embodies the patriarchal value system in which the ideal woman is associated with religiosity and obedience.

The Book of Judith recounts how King Nebuchadnezzar of Assyria launched a punitive campaign against the nations that refused to support him. His general, Holofernes, lays siege to the city of Bethulia, cutting off its water and food supply. As the siege drags on, the people despair and decide to surrender if God does not intervene within five days. Only Judith opposes this decision; maintaining her faith in God, she resolves to act alone to save her city.

Judith sets out for the enemy camp and, using her beauty and intelligence, gains access to Holofernes. She earns his trust, remains in the camp for three days, and on the fourth night, when Holofernes is drunk, she beheads him with his own sword and returns triumphantly to Bethulia. Welcomed with great celebration, Judith leads her people to victory. Through this heroic act, she becomes a respected figure, admired for her courage, faith, and virtue.

In artistic representations, Judith is frequently portrayed as a symbol of moral righteousness and goodness. Often depicted holding the head of Holofernes, she visually embodies a woman who derives strength from God yet also demonstrates intelligence, bravery, and integrity. In this way, she becomes an exemplar of the idealized female figure in the eyes of artists.

In contrast to Judith, the figure of Salome appears in Christian narratives—particularly in the Gospel of Mark and Josephus's Antiquities of the Jews—as a symbol of moral corruption and dangerous femininity. Salome is the niece and stepdaughter of King Herod, and the daughter of Herodias. The story begins with Herodias harboring resentment toward John the Baptist, who publicly condemns Herod's marriage to his brother's wife as both religiously and morally inappropriate. Herodias, enraged by this criticism, becomes determined to silence John.

Although Herod imprisons John, he hesitates to kill him, believing him to be a holy man. During Herod's birthday celebration, Salome performs a dance that captivates the guests. Pleased, Herod promises to grant her anything she desires. Prompted by her mother, Salome demands the head of John the Baptist. The Gospel of Mark recounts her words: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter." (Mark 6:17–28). Though reluctant, Herod fulfills her request to honor his oath, and Salome delivers John's head to her mother.

Çömert (2006) emphasizes that although Salome acts under her mother's influence, she nonetheless embodies the archetype of the fatal woman. Within the narrative, she is portrayed as both seductive and obedient—a duality that encodes her as both an object of desire and a destructive force.

The figures of Judith and Salome frequently appear in European painting as two opposing models of female representation, where depictions are shaped by moral codes and gender roles are reproduced through art. Judith is portrayed as the virtuous, devout, and redemptive ideal woman, while Salome is characterized by her seductive, misleading femme fatale identity. This contrast is highly significant in revealing how patriarchal ideology defines women through binary oppositions—saint/sinner, savior/destroyer—and perpetuates these roles across cultural narratives.

The Binary Codes of the Female Image: Patriarchal Ideology Reflected through the Representations of Judith and Salome

In the history of European painting, the stories of Judith and Salome appear frequently. The artistic representations of these figures serve not only as reflections of the aesthetic characteristics of their respective periods, but also as indicators of the patriarchal perspective toward women. The way artists approach these subjects reveals how socially constructed roles assigned to women are reproduced through art. Interestingly, both stories revolve around a woman who causes the death of a man. However, Judith is portrayed as a heroine who acts with her own hands, risking her life to save her people, whereas Salome is constructed as a seductive figure who influences men through her allure and is manipulated by others.

Judith is presented as an agent of divine will, acting independently and with purpose, while Salome appears as a passive character under the influence of her mother, Herodias, fulfilling someone else's desire. Judith, with her courage, is celebrated within a male-dominated world—a woman who, so to speak, becomes "masculinized" and thus respected. In contrast, Salome is condemned as a *femme fatale* whose seductive beauty leads to destruction. Despite the fact that she does not consciously commit a crime—King Herod is the one who orders John the Baptist's execution, and Salome merely conveys her mother's request—she is nonetheless branded in narratives not as an obedient daughter but as a demonic temptress.

This dichotomy underscores the gendered narrative functions of both figures: Judith represents the virtuous woman praised by the patriarchal order, while Salome symbolizes the desirable woman feared and in need of control. Both figures embody the ideal or deviant identities that patriarchal ideology assigns to women. In these depictions, the female body is constructed either as a moral exemplar to be glorified or as a threatening presence to be punished.

In Francesco del Cairo's painting (Figure 3), Salome is not depicted; instead, it is her mother Herodias who appears. Characteristic of Baroque art, the work emphasizes dramatic chiaroscuro and emotional intensity. Herodias is shown in a fainting posture, clutching the tongue of John the Baptist. This disturbing and morally provocative image creates an unsettling atmosphere, portraying the destructive power of womanhood in a nearly hysterical expression.



Figure 3: Francesco del Cairo, Herodias with the Head of Saint John the Baptist, 1625–30. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

As Linda Nochlin emphasizes in her seminal essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", art history has largely been constructed—often unconsciously—through a "Western, white, male" lens (Nochlin, 2022). This perspective not only contributes to the invisibility of women artists, but also profoundly shapes how female imagery is represented. Nochlin argues that the system excludes not only women but also anyone who is not male, white, or middle-class, highlighting the structural biases embedded within cultural institutions.

Within this framework, the figures of Judith and Salome, when re-examined, further reveal the contradictions of the patriarchal system. Judith is celebrated for killing a barbaric and invading "Eastern" man, which aligns her with heroism and virtue. In contrast, Salome is vilified for causing the death of a sacred figure who fits the mold of the Western white male ideal. This stark divergence in interpretation is not solely the result of religious or cultural values, but rather an ideological preference shaped by the identity of the male figure being represented and the woman's position in relation to him.

Artistic Representations of Judith and Salome: A Reading Between Gender, Ideology, and Aesthetics

Paintings depicting the stories of Judith and Salome have appeared in art historical works since the Middle Ages. When analyzed iconographically, we frequently encounter strikingly similar visual representations of these two characters (Figure 4). Lucas Cranach, for example, used almost identical compositions for both women. In these images, Judith is distinguished by the sword in her hand, while Salome is identified by the platter carrying the head of John the Baptist.

Judith is often shown holding a sword, symbolizing her divine mission and her unwavering determination to save her people through an act of faith and courage. Her portrayal is typically associated with a higher consciousness, loyalty to God, and self-sacrifice. By contrast, Salome's actions are frequently interpreted as stemming from personal ambition, revenge, or a desire to please her mother.

Judith's beheading of Holofernes is thus viewed as a divinely sanctioned act of liberation—carried out by a woman who skillfully uses her beauty and intellect in service of a sacred goal. Meanwhile, Salome's dance and her request for the head of John the Baptist are often framed as symbols of seduction, manipulation, and moral corruption. These interpretations reflect not only theological judgments, but also broader patriarchal narratives that define female agency in terms of virtue or vice.

In artistic depictions, the story of Judith symbolizes righteousness, courage, and the triumph of good over evil. She is portrayed as a virtuous and powerful figure—embodying not only strength and determination but also the moral virtues traditionally associated with femininity. Judith has served as an exemplary character for artists to convey idealized, socially sanctioned female actions. Her image first appeared in the Middle Ages as an allegory of humilitas (humility), exemplifying the "virtue that conquers evil" (Tükel and Yüzgüller, 2014). The subject remained popular in both Renaissance and Baroque art, where Judith was frequently portrayed in heroic and dignified compositions.

The story of Salome, on the other hand, has been interpreted in multiple ways—sometimes as a cautionary tale about the dangers of lust and seduction, and at other times as a reflection of the power dynamics between women and men. In visual representations, Salome is often depicted as a seductive and provocative figure; her dance and allure captivate both viewers and characters within the narrative. She embodies the archetype of the femme fatale, portrayed as morally weak and ensnared by her own desires and the schemes of those around her (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Left: Lucas Cranach the Elder, Judith with the Head of Holofernes, 1526–30. Oil on panel. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Right: Lucas Cranach the Elder, Salome, 1530. Oil on panel. MasterDrucke Collection.



Figure 5: Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith Beheading Holofernes, c. 1620. Oil on canvas. [Current location or museum unspecified]. Source: Sanatatak, 2020.

The history of painting is filled with male artists, while the names of female painters remain relatively unknown. In the 16th century, women were not allowed to join professional guilds or attend meetings of artistic institutions. They could not enter into formal contracts under their own names, and even ordering art supplies often required a male guarantor (Jones, 2023). A striking and telling detail is that most of the few known women artists of the time were either daughters of male painters or had close relationships with more powerful male artists. In this context, pursuing a career in art appeared to demand more courage and perseverance than even Judith's one-time act of heroism.

Among these women, Artemisia Gentileschi, the Italian Baroque painter, stands out not only for the subject matter of her works but also for how her life experiences left a visible imprint on her art. The daughter of a painter, Artemisia was one of the rare women who made a name for herself in an era when female painters were neither accepted nor recognized as part of an artistic community. Behind her success lies a deeply painful story. Her courage to become an artist confronted her with a harsh life experience: she was raped by one of her father's colleagues. During the trial, initiated by her father, Artemisia herself was subjected to intense scrutiny and treated more as the accused than as the victim.

In her painting of Judith (Figure 5), we do not merely see the biblical heroine; we witness Artemisia herself, expressing her deepest emotions—pain, rage, and a cry for justice. In this depiction, Judith's act of vengeance becomes a visual metaphor for the artist's own trauma and resistance.

In contrast, Salome, in various depictions, is sometimes portrayed as a naïve young girl seeking her mother's approval, unaware of the tragedy she has become a part of (Figure 6). At other times, she appears composed and cold in the face of violence. In these versions, the narrative shared by mother and daughter contributes to the perpetuation of moral decline across generations, reinforcing the devaluation of women in the social imagination.



Figure 6: Left: *Hippolyte Delaroche, Herodias*, 19th century (c. 1830s). Oil on canvas. [Collection unknown].
Right: *Paolo Gerolamo Piola, Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist*, 1700–1710. Oil on canvas. Source: Artsdot.

In classical periods of visual art, both the stories of Judith and Salome were commonly depicted with an emphasis on their religious significance, appearing in the works of numerous artists. However, by the 19th century, the story of Judith had largely fallen out of favor, while Salome's narrative continued to inspire not only painters but also writers and composers. A key reason for this shift was Oscar Wilde's play Salomé, written in 1891, which reinterpreted the biblical account with fictional embellishments. Wilde added dramatic elements such as Salome's unrequited love for John the Baptist and the now-iconic Dance of the Seven Veils.

In the play, Salome performs a seductive dance at Herod's banquet, removing seven veils to reveal her body, transforming the biblical tale into a complex fusion of eroticism, obsession, and power. Due to its portrayal of religious figures, the play was banned in England but gained popularity in Germany. It was later adapted into an opera by Richard Strauss, further contributing to Salome's

cultural prominence. The allure of the femme fatale image, combined with the impact of theatrical and operatic adaptations, ensured the enduring popularity of Salome's story in visual art up to the present day.

Following Wilde's reinterpretation, the Dance of the Seven Veils became an inseparable part of the Salome mythos, even appearing in Hollywood productions, where it was transformed into a recurring motif of sensuality and danger.

As Wilde's and Strauss's adaptations of Salome were staged in theater and opera, her story remained vivid in the cultural imagination and continued to maintain its popularity. In contrast, Judith's narrative, perhaps due to its overtly religious tone, did not receive the same widespread artistic attention. When comparing artistic examples (Figure 7), it becomes apparent that the eroticism and sensuality attributed to Salome have contributed significantly to the appeal of the subject.

There is a stark contrast between the solemnity embodied by Judith and the relaxed, even provocative demeanor of Salome—reflected in her posture, her grip on the sword, and the revealing nature of her costume. It is important to note that these works were created primarily by male artists, and often catered to the tastes and desires of a male-dominated world. As such, they reflect not only aesthetic preferences but also the deeper gendered structures of power and representation within visual culture.



Figure 7: Left: August Riedel, Judith, 1840. Oil on canvas. Source: Arte & Detagli.
Right: Francesco Masriera Manovens, Salomé, 1888. Oil on canvas. Source: Useum.

The characters of Salome and Judith have continued to inspire artists well beyond earlier periods. Looking at works from more recent history, we encounter depictions of these figures by renowned painters such as Jan Adam Kruseman, Gustave Moreau, Henri Regnault, Maurycy Gottlieb, Gustav Klimt, Franz von Stuck, Jean Benner, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and Kees Van Dongen. These artworks reflect the enduring fascination with the dual archetypes embodied by Judith and Salome, interpreted through a wide range of styles, periods, and ideological lenses.

An examination of these artists' works reveals that Salome has been depicted far more frequently than Judith. Each artist approached the subject through the lens of their own artistic vision, shaped by the aesthetic sensibilities of their time. Yet, across these representations, a consistent characteristic emerges: Salome is almost always portrayed as a seductive and provocative figure. Her dance and physical allure are rendered in a way that captivates not only the viewer but also the characters within the narrative itself.

Artists such as Gustave Moreau explored the emotional, sensual, and tragic dimensions of Salome's story, portraying her as a complex and enigmatic femme fatale, ensnared by her own desires and the intrigues of those around her. Unlike Judith, Salome is rarely imbued with sacred significance. Instead, her image has been repeatedly employed as a vehicle for male fantasy within the context of patriarchal art practices. As a result, the figure of Salome often functions as an object of fascination, designed to cater to the preferences of a male-dominated visual culture.



Figure 8: Gustav Klimt, Judith I, 1901. Oil on canvas. Source: Fine Art America.

Gustav Klimt is one of the painters who, rather than focusing on Salome, chose to depict Judith. Nevertheless, his portrayal of Judith—particularly in her facial expression and the sensual display of her body—evokes strong associations with lust and eroticism, bringing the Salome narrative to mind (Figure 8). Klimt's Judith I blurs the boundaries between the two figures, merging sacred heroism with seductive allure, and thus challenges the traditional visual codes that have historically separated these female archetypes.



Figure 9: Left: Kees van Dongen, Portrait of Geneviève Vix as Salome, 1920–23. Oil on canvas. Source: WikiArt. Center: Photograph of Kees van Dongen with his painting and model Geneviève Vix. Source: Sauber, 2012.

Right: Jacques Carlu, Salomé Poster Featuring Geneviève Vix, 1920. Lithographic poster. Source: Gallica Digital Library.

The story of Salome has received greater attention largely due to its popularity through literary and musical works. One of the best-known examples is Kees van Dongen's portrait of the famous soprano Geneviève Vix in her operatic role as Salome. The artist painted Vix in costume, portraying her as she performed on stage. The opera poster and the photograph taken in Van Dongen's studio further highlight the interplay between performance, representation, and media (Figure 9).



Figure 10: Lubomír Korenko, Salome, Dance of the Seven Veils, 2009. Acrylic on canvas. Source: Saatchi Art.

Lubomír Korenko's contemporary work, Salome, Dance of the Seven Veils, demonstrates that the allure of the subject persists even today. The Slovak artist approaches Salome's dance with an expressive, semi-abstract interpretation that leans toward abstraction and emotional release (Figure 10).

In contrast, American painter Kehinde Wiley turns to Judith, incorporating her figure into a broader framework of social and political critique. In his painting, Judith is represented as a powerful Black woman holding the severed head of a white woman, her facial expression unflinching and authoritative. Wiley's work not only critiques gender inequality but also delivers a bold statement against systemic racism. The ornamental, wallpaper-like backgrounds challenge the viewer's sense of realism and theatricalize the scene, inviting questions about visibility, power, and historical narrative (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Left: *Kehinde Wiley, Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 2012. Oil on canvas. Collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art.
Right: *Kehinde Wiley, Judith and Holofernes*, 2012. Oil on canvas. Source: Artsy.

Conclusion: Rethinking and Reconstructing the Female Image

Throughout history, visual art has served as a mirror to society—reflecting myths, religious beliefs, and socio-political structures. It is therefore possible to find within artistic expression crucial clues about the cultural and gender roles attributed to women across different periods. Particularly striking is how the normalization of these roles—shaped by patriarchal worldviews—has often been reinforced through art. The ideological underpinnings embedded within artworks subtly perpetuate accepted narratives, often going unnoticed. When mythological and religious stories are visualized through artistic media, they amplify and solidify these norms, making their impact more pervasive and powerful.

Examining representations of Judith and Salome in painting reveals how these figures have been shaped by a patriarchal gaze, materializing in the archetypes of the femme fatale and the femme vitale. These narratives, rooted in religious texts, mirror the gendered attitudes of monotheistic religions, and their visual afterlives continue to echo in today's gender roles and expectations. Art becomes a vital lens through which we can detect these archetypal patterns—those that designate a woman's "acceptable" actions, spaces, and attributes. In this context, Joseph Campbell's reflection is particularly poignant: "In our mythology, there is no model for the individual woman's quest. Nor is there a model for the man who marries such a woman. We are in this together—and must work toward a solution together, not through passion but with compassion, patiently supporting one another's growth." (Campbell, 2020, 15–16)

Maureen Murdock, in The Heroine's Journey, further expands this understanding by emphasizing the importance of reclaiming the feminine in a patriarchal world:

"It is true that women today are on a quest. The goal of this quest is to embrace fully their feminine nature, to learn to value themselves as women, and to heal their feminine wounds. It is an essential inner journey toward becoming a fully integrated, whole, and balanced human being. As a feminist, my task is not to compete with men in their world—that is an easy and fruitless endeavor. My task is to live my life fully as a woman, delighting in myself and in my place in the universe. When a woman honors not only the needs of others but also her own, the sacred marriage of the masculine and feminine becomes possible. This integration, and the awareness that flows from it, is vital in our efforts to restore balance to life on Earth." (Murdock, 1990)

Raising awareness—both socially and personally—about women's self-worth and their roles in shaping their own lives is essential in the pursuit of gender equality. In our time, it is critical that women move consciously beyond the unspoken rules, expectations, and cultural assumptions inherited from the past. The aim of this study is not to issue accusatory judgments, but rather to trace the tradition-bound construction of the female image and to expose the ideological functions of art in reinforcing such constructions.

Understanding the past—and seeing how ideology has been woven into aesthetic choices—can allow us to begin transforming the present. That transformation starts with awareness.

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EXTENDED SUMMARY

Introduction

This text explores how female imagery, deeply rooted in prehistoric and early agricultural societies, has continuously evolved in art and mythology, reflecting the socio-cultural and economic structures of each era. Beginning with the matriarchal Mother Goddess cult—exemplified by the Çatalhöyük figurine—female figures have embodied fertility, productivity, and natural dominion. As Joseph Campbell notes, the shift to plant cultivation and animal domestication elevated women's roles, a dynamic mirrored in these goddess representations. Despite changes in belief systems over time, new female deities have consistently carried traces of this primordial archetype, adapting to diverse cultural contexts while reinforcing the symbolic significance of the feminine in both mythology and visual art.

The Transformation of the Female Image and Its Relationship with the Patriarchal System

Throughout history, the transformation of the female image in art has been deeply influenced by the shifting power dynamics between men and women. Early representations of the Mother Goddess emphasized women's power, but with the emergence of patriarchal systems, women's images became confined and redefined. The development of patriarchal control through monotheistic religions and property ownership reshaped gender roles, confining women to domestic spaces and imposing strict ideals of female beauty and morality. This patriarchal structure was further legitimized by religious narratives, depicting women either as virtuous and pious figures or as morally corrupt temptresses. Such binary roles—embodied in figures like Eve, Delilah, and Salome versus the Virgin Mary, Judith, and Susanna—reflected and reinforced the patriarchal values of each era.

This dichotomy continued to shape artistic representations across centuries, where the ideal female form was tailored to the tastes and moral codes of the male gaze. The enduring archetypes of femme fatale and femme vitale reflect these dualities, with the femme fatale embodying men's fear of female sexuality and agency, and the femme vitale representing the virtuous, submissive woman. Despite modern challenges to these stereotypes, they continue to shape perceptions of women today, as seen in historical and contemporary art, literature, and cinema. The figures of Salome and Judith in biblical texts and their artistic portrayals serve as striking examples of how patriarchal ideology has persistently shaped the ideal and deviant female images throughout cultural history.

Judith and Salome: The Origins of Two Opposing Female Archetypes in Sacred Texts

The Book of Judith, an apocryphal text, presents Judith as a heroic and devout widow whose actions embody the patriarchal ideal of female virtue. Her genealogy, tracing ancestry from father to son, underscores the patriarchal context that values women's obedience and religiosity. Judith's courageous act of beheading Holofernes to save her city elevates her as a symbol of moral righteousness in both religious narratives and artistic depictions, where she is frequently portrayed as an icon of female virtue and bravery. In contrast, the figure of Salome, found in the Gospel of Mark and Josephus's accounts, is framed as a dangerous and seductive femme fatale, despite her passive role under her mother's command. This dichotomy—Judith as virtuous savior and Salome as destructive temptress—illustrates how patriarchal ideologies have historically constructed binary representations of women, reinforced through visual arts and cultural narratives.

The Binary Codes of the Female Image: Patriarchal Ideology Reflected through the Representations of Judith and Salome

The narratives of Judith and Salome in European painting offer a revealing lens into patriarchal constructions of femininity. Judith, depicted as a courageous and self-reliant figure acting on divine will, is celebrated within a male-dominated system that frames her heroism as aligning with masculine ideals. In contrast, Salome is consistently portrayed as a passive yet seductive femme fatale, manipulated by her mother and condemned for her beauty and supposed moral weakness. This binary—Judith as virtuous savior and Salome as dangerous temptress—underscores the gendered expectations embedded in visual culture, wherein female bodies are either idealized as moral exemplars or vilified as threats.

Further complicating these portrayals is the broader patriarchal context highlighted by Linda Nochlin's critique of art history's exclusionary male gaze. The selective celebration of Judith's violence against an "Eastern" man and the vilification of Salome's role in the death of a sacred male figure reflect racial and gender hierarchies within the patriarchal order. Such artistic depictions not only reinforce binary gender roles but also reveal how cultural narratives and aesthetic conventions perpetuate ideologically driven representations of women as either virtuous or dangerous.

Artistic Representations of Judith and Salome: A Reading Between Gender, Ideology, and Aesthetics

This passage critically examines the divergent portrayals of Judith and Salome in European painting as reflections of patriarchal ideology. Judith is consistently represented as a virtuous, courageous heroine who acts with agency and purpose, thereby gaining admiration and respect within a male-dominated society. In contrast, Salome, despite her largely passive role in the narrative, is depicted as a femme fatale whose seductive beauty and manipulative actions are seen as morally corrupt and dangerous. This binary construction of the female image—celebrating the virtuous woman while condemning the seductive one—reveals how patriarchal narratives have historically delineated acceptable and deviant forms of femininity. Drawing upon Linda Nochlin's critique of the exclusionary, Western, white, male perspective in art history, the section highlights how these artistic representations not only reinforce gendered power structures but also underscore the racial and cultural biases embedded within dominant visual traditions.

Conclusion: Rethinking and Reconstructing the Female Image

This concluding section emphasizes that the visual arts have long been complicit in reinforcing patriarchal norms by codifying gender roles through mythological and religious iconography. By analyzing the archetypes of Judith and Salome, it becomes clear how these powerful female figures have been confined within binary narratives that either idealize or demonize them. Drawing on insights from thinkers like Joseph Campbell and Maureen Murdock, the conclusion advocates for a conscious re-evaluation of these images to foster gender equality and self-worth. Rather than simply reproducing past roles, the task is to critically uncover these patterns in art, thereby reclaiming space for women's authentic voices and experiences.