



Feminist interrogations of art history began in the 1970s, questioning disregarded narratives of women artists, the lack of artistic education for women, the representation of women by male artists, and whether there is a distinct perspective in art made by women that is worthy of study. Two primary avenues of investigation defined these feminist art histories as they developed and reached a more nuanced maturity: the inclusion, and re-inclusion, of women into a revisionist art historical canon; and the representation of women by men. This exhibition examines the latter, reflecting on the social and aesthetic values assigned to women when presented as little more than anonymous beauties, symbolic vessels, and passive bodies for male consumption.

This selection of paintings and prints from the JSMA's permanent collection considers the conceptual and visual representation of women by male artists from the sixteenth through the twentieth century. In each image there are opportunities to examine the relationship between the objectification and idealization of archetypal feminine virtues, the female form, and the timeworn concept of woman as muse. How are women portrayed as objects of conventionalized hetero-normative male desire? What is the value system assigned to women based on measures of chastity, purity, class, and beauty? What are the limitations of such categories as virgin, wife, mother, muse, and sexual object? What is the measure of a woman's worth as portrayed and passed down by the patriarchal confines of a traditional art historical canon?

This exhibition was inspired by the [Feminist Art Coalition's](#) mission to promote feminist art histories "as a catalyst for discourse and civic engagement" during the 2020 election season and beyond.



Left:

Follower of Joos van Cleve (Netherlandish, ca. 1485-1540)

*Madonna of the Cherries*, ca. 1550-1600

Oil on cradle board

Estate of Roy and Jeanne Neville; 2014:27.1

Top right:

Andreas Wolfgang Brennhaeuser (German, 1819-55), after

Friedrich Wachsmann (Czech, 1820-97)

*Ave Maria*, 1853

Steel engraving on paper

Gift of William Ehrman, from the Fleischner Estate; 1976:8.125

Bottom right:

Joachim Patinir (Netherlandish, ca. 1480-1524) with Joos van

Cleve (Netherlandish, ca. 1485-1540)

*Madonna and Child in a Landscape*, ca. 1515-24

Oil on panel

Estate of Roy and Jeanne Neville; L2011:56.27





*Madonna of the Cherries, ca. 1550-1600*



*Madonna and Child in a Landscape, ca. 1515-24*



*Ave Maria, 1853*

The Virgin Mary is a pinnacle of sacred and secular feminine virtues, embodying ideals of motherhood, chastity, and piety, innocence, compassion, and acquiescence. The canon of visual motifs of Mary, such as the Madonna and Child, in which the young mother cradles or plays with an infant Jesus, were developed from scripture beginning in the middle ages and reached their peak during the Renaissance. Mary became a quintessential symbol of womanhood whose worth was defined by her identity as the mother of Jesus and her adaptability as a vehicle of liturgical values. In **Madonna and Child in a Landscape** and **Madonna of the Cherries**, human and spiritual virtues are gently balanced, made tangible in the physical beauty of Mary's delicate features, and enhanced by regal robes and Edenic pastoral views. The ideal woman sits serenely with her child, a picture of patient humility and quiet devotion, of motherhood as the principle role and highest honor in a woman's life. **Ave Maria** locates the same values in a pious young woman devoted to prayers, kneeling in deference to the precedent set by the namesake of her recitation.

Top left:

Albert Henry Payne (British, 1812-1902) after Joseph-Désiré Court  
(French, 1797-1865)

*Flora*, ca. 1840

Steel engraving on paper

Gift of William Ehrman, from the Fleischner Estate; 1976:8.130

Bottom left:

Albert Henry Payne, (British, 1812-1902) after Joseph-Désiré Court  
(French, 1797-1865)

*Bertha*, 1851

Steel engraving on paper

Gift of William Ehrman, from the Fleischner Estate; 1976:8.170

Right:

Carl Eulenstein (German, 1823-1903), after Constant-Joseph  
Brochart (French, 1816-99)

*Der Rose Gruss (The Rose's Greeting)*, ca. 1853

Steel engraving on paper

Gift of William Ehrman, from the Fleischner Estate; 1976:8.123





*Flora, ca. 1840*



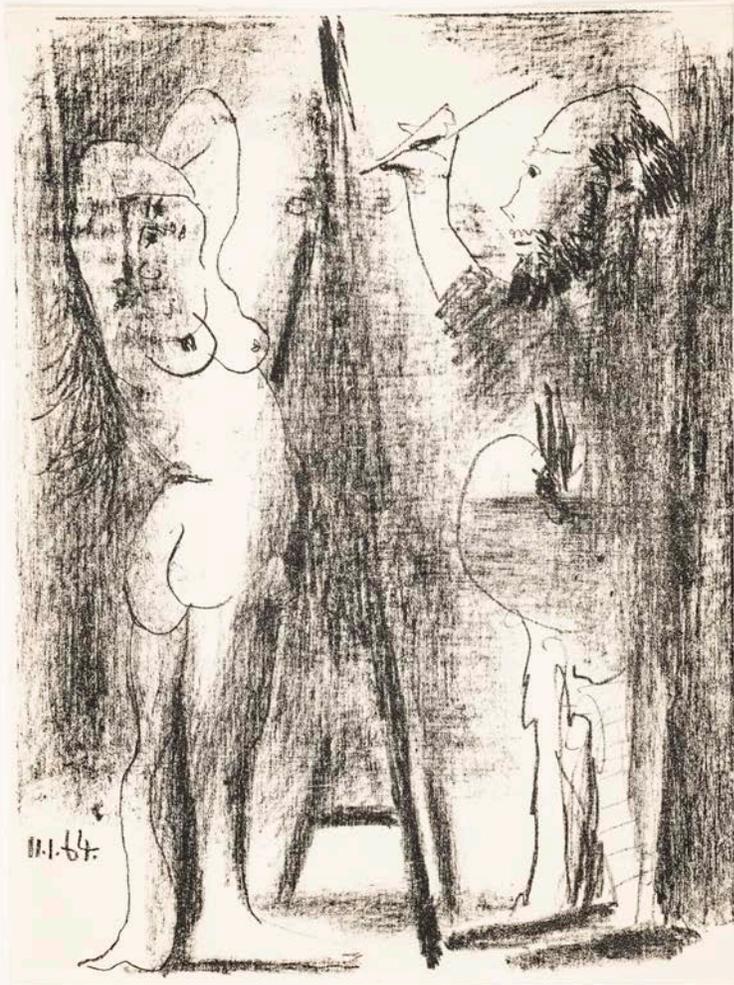
*Bertha, 1851*



*Der Rose Gruss (The Rose's Greeting), ca. 1853*

The original paintings from which this trio of engravings were copied are likely examples of marriage portraits. In each, the sitter is a real woman captured at one of the quintessential occasions of her lifecycle and seen through an idealistic veil passed down from Renaissance portraiture and underpinned by Platonic philosophy. Each figure becomes a symbolic vessel in which exterior beauty is attuned to the pitch of ideal feminine virtues within.

Hair decorously bound in the Renaissance template, corseted waists hugged by sumptuous gowns, and décolletages highlighted by lace finery, **Flora** and **Bertha** pose as celebratory representations of wifely virtue and matrimonial pride – tangible embodiments of the honor and wealth of two united families. The portraits straddle a delicate line between the intimacy of marriage and the social sphere in which marriage is paraded. Emanating contentment and serenity, Bertha shimmers in hesitant modesty while Flora gazes with mature confidence, each personifying feminine ideals of faith, silence and beauty. A more individualized vision, **Der Rose Gruss** commemorates matrimonial fidelity and the romance of courtship, idealizing the symbiotic vitality of innocence and sexuality in a young bride between the pinnacles of virgin and mother.



Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1891-1973)  
*The Artist and his Model II*, 1964  
 Lithograph on paper

Gift of Keith Achepohl; 2016:15.18

The relationship between concepts of woman as muse and acts of creativity in the Western world goes back to Ancient Greece, which celebrated nine sisters as the divine inspiration for men composing poetry, histories, theatrical entertainment, music, and dance. The female form, embodied by the nude model, is replete with such associations, envisioning women as objects devoid of individual personhood onto which artists can project their vision, desires, fears, and ideals. A woman's worth located in the potential of her body, and her spirit, to rouse a male artist's interests, imagination, and creativity. As in Western art historical portrait traditions, cultural standards of physical beauty – ideal proportions, smooth flesh – accord with inner virtues of purity and innocence. Qualities that deviate from these ideals, communicated through disorder or distortion, comparably equate to socially “undesirable” feminine traits.

The concentration on the female form and dependance on nude women models within the canon of Western art history also defined traditions of art education. In most institutions a line of social decorum prevented women artists from being in the presence of nude models, creating a substantial barrier to the quality of professional training, and thus success, available to their male counterparts. This persisted until the mid-twentieth century.



Pierre Daura (Catalan-American, 1896-1976)

*Nude Reading*, ca. 1933

Oil on canvas

Gift of Martha Daura in memory of Chapin D. Clark; 2004:14.6

Top:

Brassaï (Hungarian-French, 1899-1984)

*Transmutations. IX: jeune fille rêvant (Transmutations. IX: young woman dreaming)*, 1934-35, printed 1967

Toned gelatin silver print

Gift of Dan Berley; 2001:1.20

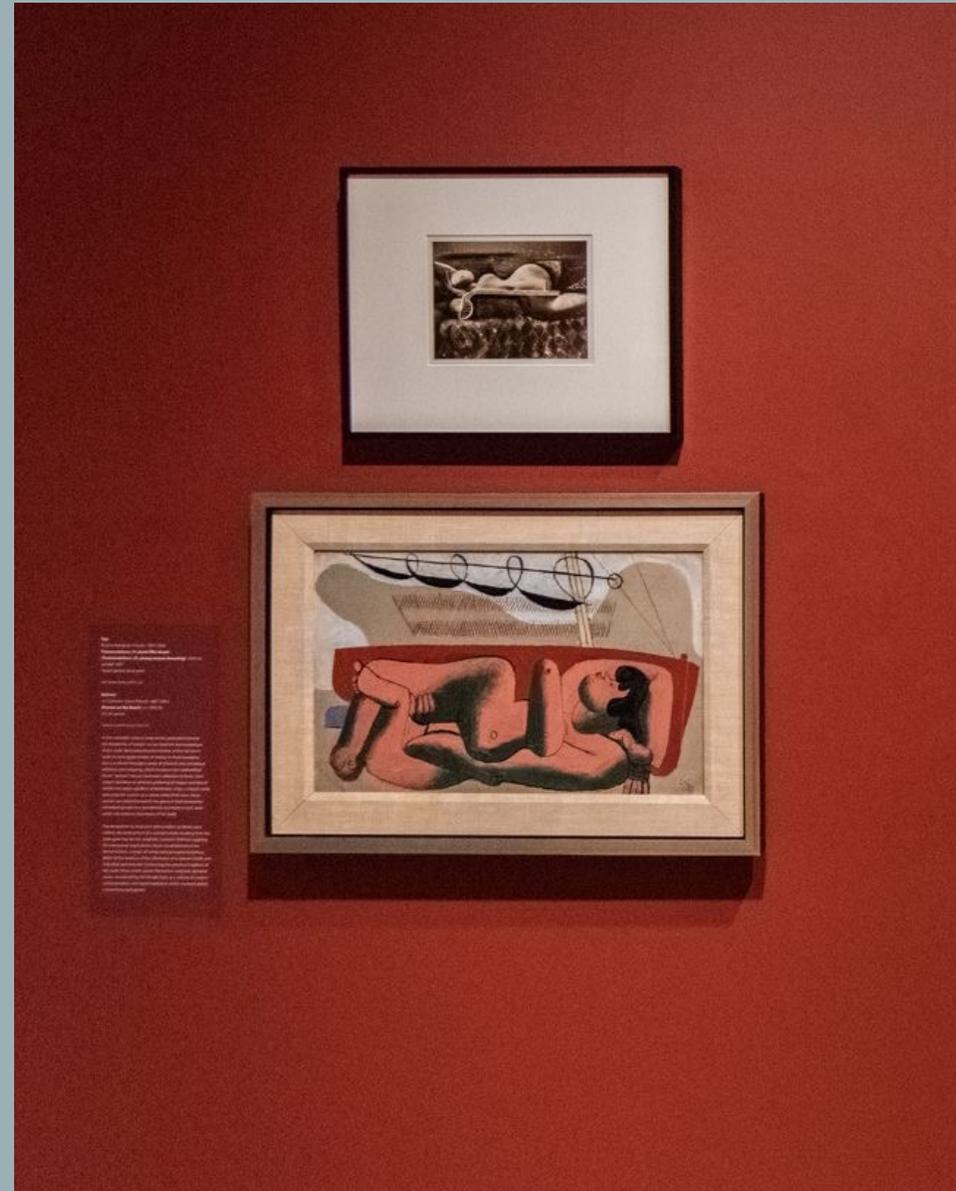
Bottom:

Le Corbusier (Swiss-French, 1887-1965)

*Woman on the Beach*, ca. 1930-50

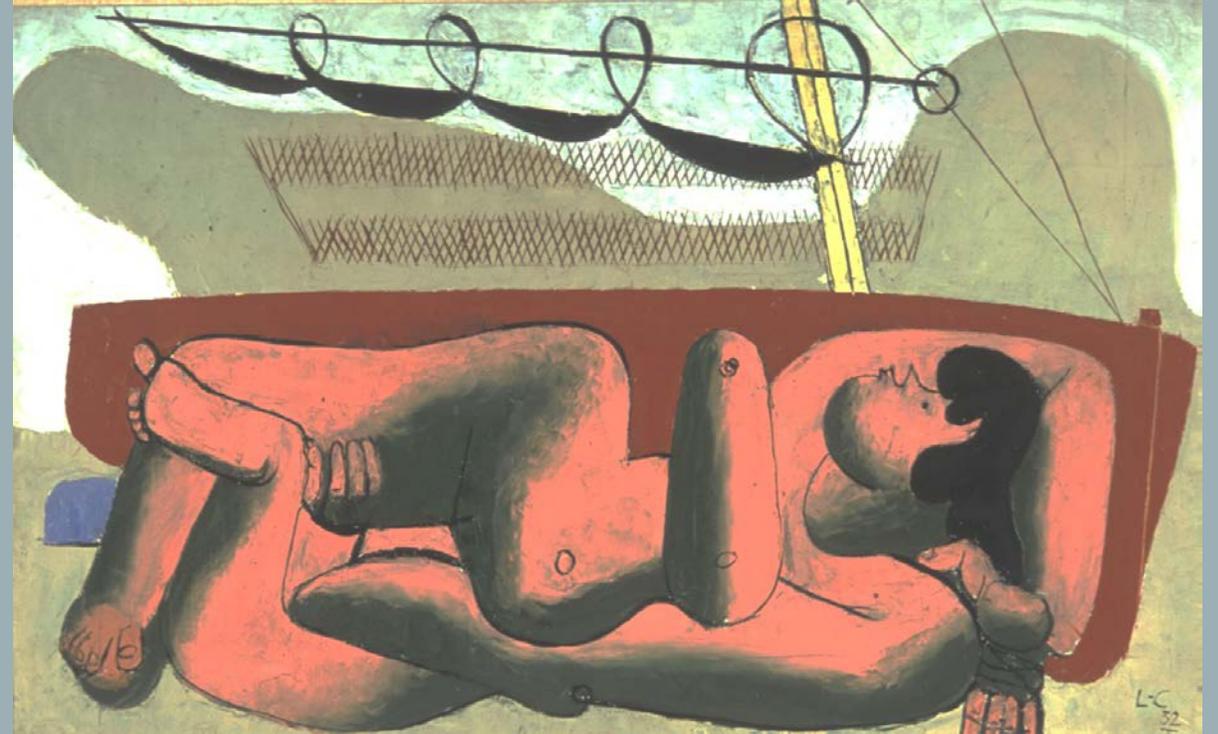
Oil on canvas

Widmer Fund Purchase; 1967:3.4





*Transmutations. IX: jeune fille rêvant (Transmutations. IX: young woman dreaming)*  
1934-35, printed 1967



*Woman on the Beach, ca. 1930-50*

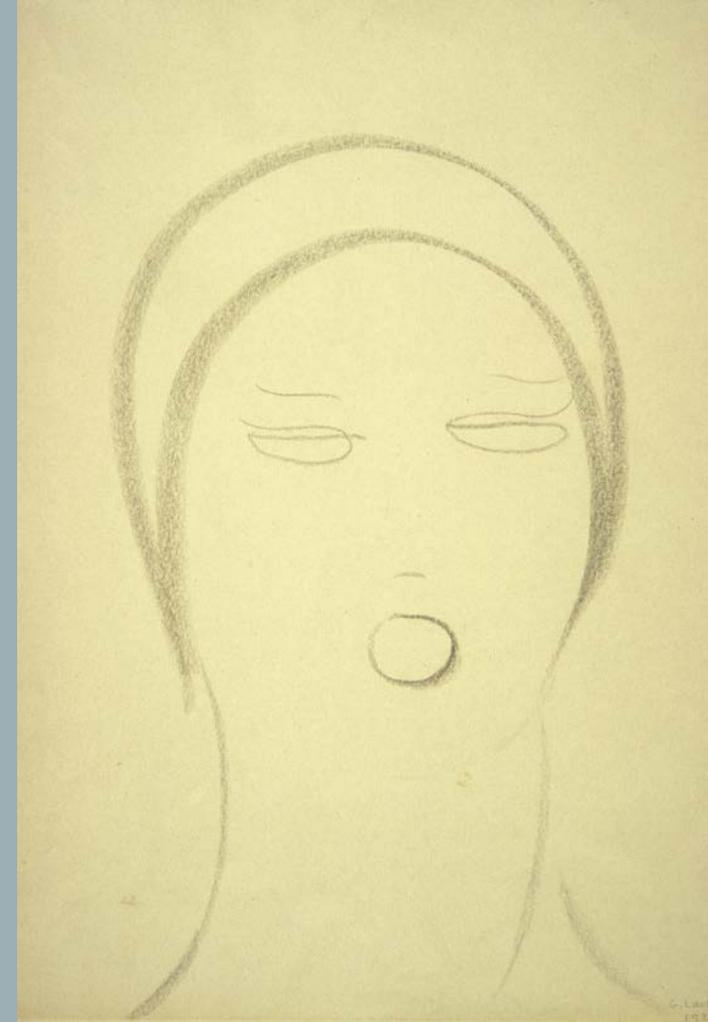
In the twentieth century, male artists graduated beyond the dichotomy of realistic versus idealistic representations of the nude, deconstructing the familiar artistic terrain in order to interrogate modes of seeing. In these examples, this is achieved through a series of physical and conceptual rotations and cropping, which transform the unidentified titular “woman” into an inanimate collection of forms. Each subject becomes an abstract gathering of shapes and formal motifs that retain signifiers of femininity (a hip, a breast) while removing the woman as a whole entity from view. These women are defamiliarized to the point of total anonymity; individual perspective and identity atomized in each male artist’s recreational distortions of her body.

The temptation to read such interventions as literal, even violent, deconstructions of a woman’s body resulting from the male gaze may be too simplistic, however. Without negating the conceptual implications, these visual distortions are formal actions, a series of compositional experimentations, albeit at the expense of the wholeness of a woman’s body and individual personhood. Continuing the canonical tradition of the nude, these artists center themselves and their personal vision, manipulating the female body as a vehicle of creative communication and experimentation within received artistic conventions and genres.



Paul Cezanne (French, 1839-1906)  
*Head of a young woman*, originally etched 1873, re-printed ca. 1914  
Etching on paper

Estate of Henry Alexander; TN00656.4



Gaston Lachaise (French, 1882-1935)  
*Woman's Head*, 1924  
Charcoal on paper

Gift of Robert J. and Pauline L. Forsyth; 1993:1.14