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ART IN THE FEMININE: BRUSHSTROKES IN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION, PRESENTATIONS OF THE BODY, NATURE AND SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION IN THE HISTORY OF ART

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses art as an artistic and cultural manifestation, focusing on the relationship between femininity, nature, and culture within the context of Western artistic production. The aim of this research is to analyse the historical relationship between femininity, nature, corporeality, fertility, and reproduction, in opposition to the values of reason, intellectual creation, and culture, traditionally associated with masculinity. This symbolic dichotomy has influenced modes of artistic representation and contributed to the construction and maintenance of gender hierarchies throughout the history of art. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on the critical analysis of works of art and informed by contributions from art history, feminist studies, and ecofeminism, with the aim of questioning traditional models of the relationship between gender, culture, and nature. The methodology therefore favours an interdisciplinary perspective, bringing together art history, visual arts, feminist theory, and ecofeminism. This approach makes it possible to develop a critical analysis of images as culturais productions embedded in specific historical and social contexts. The study also addresses the historical marginalisation of women artists, highlighting their creative agency beyond the social, institutional, and cultural constraints that, throughout history, have limited their access to artistic training, exhibition opportunities, and recognition within the art world. For this analysis, the contributions of Pollock, Ortner, Blocker, Bryson, and Anne Cauquelin are brought into dialogue, articulating perspectives from art history, visual studies, and ecofeminist thought. Finally, the study emphasises the importance of feminist approaches in reassessing art history, particularly through the recognition of women artists, authorship, forms of representation, and processes of recognition and legitimisation within the artistic canon.

Keywords: Women's Art, Art History, Intellectual Creation, Artistic Recognition, Artistic Canon

INTRODUCTION

Art is an important form of human expression, reflecting values, experiences, identities and social transformations across various historical periods. In this context, the presence of women takes on particular significance, both as the subject of representation and as creators. Throughout history, women have faced restrictions on access to artistic training and institutions of recognition, and have been depicted from predominantly male perspectives Nochlin (1971), Chadwick (2020). Despite these obstacles, numerous female artists have contributed to the transformation of artistic languages and to challenging the structures that constrained their participation in the art world Pollock (1988).

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The feminist approach to art history has made it possible to challenge traditional narratives and to highlight the role of women in artistic production. In this context, the body, nature and symbols take on particular importance as means of expression and identity building. The female body, traditionally associated with ideals of beauty, motherhood and sensuality, has also come to be used by female artists as a space for self-affirmation, resistance and reflection on gender and identity Jones (1998), Chadwick (2020).

Nature and symbolic elements, in turn, have enabled the expression of experiences, memories and cultural meanings, transcending the merely aesthetic dimension of the artwork Pollock (1988).

From this perspective, women's participation in art history, artistic representations and practices takes on particular significance, with a special focus on the body, nature and symbolic construction in relation to the development of female identity and recognition in the artistic, social and cultural spheres.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

For centuries, male perspectives, frequently associating women with the body, nature, fertility, and reproduction, predominantly shaped the representation of women in Western art history. This narrative contributed to the marginalisation of women's artistic production within traditional art historical discourses. In this context, it has become pertinent to examine how women artists have challenged and transformed these representations through painting and the visual arts. An analysis of women artists across different historical periods and socio-cultural contexts allows us to identify diverse approaches to the representation of the body, identity, nature, and the female experience, highlighting the plurality of perspectives developed within women's artistic practices.

This research provides an understanding of the representation of the feminine in art and the extent to which artistic production has contributed to challenging these representations.

From this perspective, the following objectives are defined:

- To contextualise women's participation in painting and the history of art;
- To identify the main social, cultural and institutional challenges faced by women artists throughout history;
- To analyse creativity, experience and artistic expression as dimensions of women's artistic output;
- To analyse the contribution of women artists to the representation of the female body;

This research is guided by the following central question:

- How has the representation of the feminine in Western painting contributed to the construction of gender identities and relationships, and how have women artists challenged and transformed these representations through their artistic practice?

This analysis helps us to understand the importance of women's participation in the history of art and the role they have played in re-examining traditional artistic narratives. For centuries, women were depicted repeatedly in works of art whilst being excluded or restricted as creative agents. This situation was linked to social, cultural and institutional structures that restricted their access to training, professional development and artistic recognition Nochlin (1971). In this regard, the research seeks to understand how artistic images contribute to the construction of meanings attributed to the feminine, the body and nature, whilst analysing the mechanisms that have contributed to the marginalisation of women in art history and the strategies developed by female artists.

STATE OF THE ART

The study of the relationship between art, the feminine and nature has developed through the intersection of art history, feminist studies, visual studies and ecofeminist thought. One of the key moments in this review came with Nochlin (1971), whose essay '*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*' questioned the assumptions underpinning the exclusion of women from the Western artistic canon. The author demonstrated that this recognised absence from art history was not the result of a lack of creative ability, but of the social, educational and institutional conditions that limited women's access to training and to the mechanisms of artistic legitimisation.

Pollock (1988), Pollock (1999) further developed the feminist critique of art history, highlighting that artistic discourses are constructed based on power relations and specific cultural models. Ortner (1974) developed the conceptual relationship between women and nature in particular within the fields of anthropology and feminist theory.

The author identifies the nature/culture opposition as a recurring symbolic structure in Western societies, in which the feminine is frequently associated with nature and the masculine with culture. In the field of art history and theory, authors such as Chadwick (2020) and Jane Blocker (2001) have broadened the debate on the representation of women, analysing the ways in which women artists have used the body, identity and memory as spaces for challenging and reconstructing meaning. At the same time, ecofeminist thought has introduced new interpretations of the relationship between gender and the environment.

Merchant (1980) analysed, from a historical perspective, the link between the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women, whilst Plumwood (1993) criticised the hierarchical dualisms that pit nature against culture, body against mind, and the feminine against the masculine. Within the field of image studies, Bryson (1983) contributed to the understanding of artistic representation as a system shaped by cultural and historical conventions.

His approach enables an analysis of how the artistic gaze contributes to the construction of meanings attributed to the female body. Furthermore, Cauquelin (2005) demonstrated the representation of landscape, nature lies between image, and reality According to Nochlin (1971), the limited presence of women in art history is not the result of a lack of creative ability, but of structural inequalities that have limited the professional development of female artists.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, of an exploratory and interpretative nature, centred on the critical analysis of the representation of the feminine in art from a feminist and ecofeminist perspective. The research is conducted through a literature review and an iconographic and iconological analysis of selected works of art, books, academic articles and institutional documents published by international organisations and leading researchers in the field, enabling a critical reflection on the evolution of the female presence in painting and its contributions to contemporary artistic production.

The literature review forms the theoretical basis of the research, incorporating contributions from art history, feminist studies and ecofeminism. In this context, we draw on the reflections of Pollock (1988), Pollock. (1999) on the feminist critique of art history, Ortner (1974) on the cultural construction of the relationship between women and nature, Bryson (1983) on systems of representation and the gaze, and Cauquelin (2005) on the processes of legitimisation and contextualisation of artistic production. Authors such as Linda Nochlin (1971), Merchant (1980) and Chadwick (2020), who enable a deeper understanding of the relationships between gender, culture and artistic production, complement this framework.

In this sense, the feminist perspective proves fundamental to a more inclusive and critical understanding of art history. By questioning mechanisms of exclusion and valuing different experiences and forms of expression, this approach demonstrates that art can constitute a space for self-affirmation, resistance and social transformation. The recognition of women's artistic production represents a shift in opportunities within the history of art, viewed from a broader and more diverse perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALISATION OF ART AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMININE

This literature review focuses on the relationship between art, the feminine and nature, highlighting an interdisciplinary field within art history concerning visual studies and ecofeminist thought. One of the seminal contributions to feminist art history criticism is found in the work of Nochlin (1971), who questioned the absence of women from the Western artistic canon in her essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'. The author argues that the historical invisibility of women artists is not due to a lack of creative ability, but rather to institutional and social structures that have restricted access to art education, spaces for artistic production and cultural legitimisation. Building on this perspective, Pollock (1988), Pollock. (1999) further explored the relationships between gender, representation and power in art history. For the author, the artistic field is constituted by discourses and practices that reflect ideologies and forms of social organisation that were previously marginalised. Ortner (1974) explored the symbolic relationship between the feminine and nature in particular, through an analysis of the opposition between nature and culture.

The author demonstrates that, in society, women have been associated with nature and linked to biological reproduction, whilst men have benefited culturally from creation. This symbolic construct has had consequences for the way in which the feminine was represented in visual culture, reinforcing images of fertility, physicality and passivity.

Within the framework of the analysis of representation and visual systems, Bryson (1983) conceptualises the artistic image as a system constructed through cultural and ideological codes that influence the production and interpretation of images. Cauquelin (2005) reflects on the cultural construction of nature and landscape, demonstrating that it is understood as a natural representation of reality. Merchant (1980) demonstrated that the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women historically have been linked to certain scientific and cultural models.

Plumwood (1993) criticised the hierarchical dualisms that underpin oppositions such as nature/culture, body/mind and feminine/masculine, proposing an approach that recognises the interdependence between human beings and the environment. In the field of artistic practice, authors Chadwick (2020) and Jane Blocker (2001) analyse the ways in which female artists have used the body, memory, territory and nature as spaces for the reconstruction of identity. Although feminist studies have contributed significantly to the deconstruction of traditional models of representation, it is now pertinent to investigate the boundaries in contemporary art between the body, the environment, identity and culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GENDER AND ART HISTORY

The study of the relationship between gender and art history enables us to understand how the social differences attributed to men and women have influenced artistic production, representation and recognition. For a long time, art history was constructed from a predominantly male perspective, valuing male artists above all and assigning women a secondary role, often as models or subjects of representation Nochlin (1971). From the 1970s onwards, feminist art history began to challenge these narratives, seeking to understand the reasons for women's limited presence in the artistic canon. Nochlin (1971) demonstrated that the exclusion of women could not be explained by a lack of talent, but by the social and institutional barriers that limited their access to artistic training, art schools and forums for recognition. This perspective made it possible to analyse artistic production by taking into account the historical and social conditions in which the works were created.

In this context, gender has come to be understood as a fundamental category for the analysis of art. Pollock (1988) argues that the experiences of men and women in the artistic field are shaped by social, cultural and economic structures, making it necessary to analyse the power relations that determine who produces, who is represented and who is recognised. Feminist art history seeks not only to reclaim female artists who have been overlooked, but also to question the very criteria used to construct the artistic canon. The representation of the body is also an important dimension of this debate. The female body has historically been associated with standards of beauty and femininity, and is presented as an object of contemplation. Feminist art has helped to shift this perspective, enabling women to use their own bodies as a means of expression, self-representation and resistance Jones (1998), Chadwick (2020). In this way, the intersection of gender and art history facilitates a more critical and comprehensive interpretation of artistic production.

By challenging power structures and traditional forms of representation, this approach helps to recognise the diversity of women's experiences and to understand art as a space for identity-building, resistance and social transformation.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FEMININE AND NATURE

The relationship between the feminine and nature constitutes one of the most enduring symbolic constructs in Western culture, having influenced the production and interpretation of images in the history of art that established dichotomies between nature and culture, emotion and reason, body and intellect, associating the feminine with the former and the masculine with the latter.

In this context, Ortner (1974) questions the apparent universality of the association between women and nature, arguing that it stems from symbolic systems that subordinate the feminine through its conceptual proximity to the biological processes of reproduction and motherhood. The author demonstrates that this cultural construct has legitimised throughout history, unequal gender relations, whilst also influencing forms of visual representation. Pollock (1988) broadens this perspective by demonstrating that art history has been constructed based on discourses and institutions that have privileged the male gaze, shaping both artistic production and the interpretation of images. Representations of the feminine reflect ideological structures that reinforce the symbolic association of women with nature, passivity and contemplation. Jane Blocker (2001) highlights that images of femininity are not reflections of reality, but devices that produce meaning and contribute to the social construction of gender. Building on this feminist framework, the contributions of Bryson (1983) and Cauquelin (2005) enable a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of representation and legitimisation of images in art history. Bryson demonstrates that the gaze is constructed historically by cultural and ideological conventions, whilst Cauquelin highlights that the meaning of works depends on the institutional systems and historical contexts that regulate their circulation and reception. Taken together, these authors help us to understand that the association between the feminine and nature is a historical construct shaped by visual culture. This framework provides a solid theoretical basis for analysing representations of the feminine in art, bringing together the contributions of feminist theory with art history and art criticism, and enabling us to understand how images have played a part in the consolidation — and, more recently, the deconstruction — of the symbolic relationship between the feminine and nature.

THE EXPRESSION 'ART IN THE FEMININE'

The expression 'art in the feminine' goes beyond a simple reference to artistic production by women, pointing instead to a critical analysis of the relationships between gender, representation and power in the history of art. For centuries, art history has favoured male artists, relegating women to a peripheral position, both as creators and as subjects of representation. This exclusion did not stem from a lack of artistic production by women, but from the social, institutional and cultural structures that limited women's access to artistic training, patronage, art academies and the mechanisms that legitimise artistic practice. As Pollock (1988) argues, art history must be understood as a field of discourse production that reflects and reproduces power relations. The author demonstrates that the categories of 'artist', 'genius' and 'tradition' have historically been constructed from a male perspective, rendering women's contributions invisible and normalising their exclusion from the artistic canon.

From this perspective, analysing art from a feminist perspective involves questioning the assumptions that have underpinned the writing of art history and the criteria that have defined the aesthetic and cultural value of works of art. This critical review has

its roots in essay, Nochlin (1971), which challenges the absence of *'great female artists'*, demonstrating that this absence does not stem from a lack of ability on the part of women, but from the social and institutional barriers that have constrained the training, professionalisation and recognition of female artists. In the context of visual representation, the historical association between the feminine and nature has been one of the key factors in the symbolic construction of female identity. As Ortner (1974) argues, this relationship stems from cultural systems that contrast nature and culture, attributing a conceptual proximity to biological and reproductive processes.

This dichotomy has profoundly influenced Western iconography, cementing images of women associated with fertility, beauty, passivity and harmony with the natural world. Within this framework, contemporary art has played a fundamental role in deconstructing these narratives, proposing new ways of representing the body, identity and the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

WOMEN AS OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS OF ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION

Throughout the history of art, women have been depicted as objects, particularly through images associated with beauty, sensuality and motherhood. These representations were, to a large extent, constructed from a male perspective, contributing to the definition of certain standards of femininity and to the objectification of the female body Chadwick (2020). At the same time, women faced various limitations in accessing training and artistic institutions, which contributed to their limited presence in traditional narratives of art history. Nochlin (1971) demonstrated that this absence was not due to a lack of talent, but to the social and institutional structures that hindered women's training, creative output and recognition as artists. With the development of feminist art history, women have progressively moved from being represented objects to creative subjects.

Many female artists began to use their own bodies and their experiences as means of expression and to challenge traditional representations of femininity. The body has thus become a space for the affirmation of identity, resistance and reflection on gender, sexuality and power relations Jones (1998). In this regard, Pollock (1988) argues for the need to rethink the history of art based on the relationships between gender, social context and artistic production. The recognition of women as artists does not merely mean adding new names to the canon, but challenging the structures that determined who could produce art, be represented and achieve recognition. Women thus come to play an active role in constructing the images and meanings that pertain to their own identity.

THE FEMALE BODY AS A SPACE OF BEAUTY, IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

The female body occupies a central place in artistic production, having historically been associated with standards of beauty, sensuality, motherhood and femininity.

Figure 1

Figure 1 Art and Feminine in the Natural World

Source: Illustrations By the Author

Figure 2

Figure 2 Art and Feminine in the Natural World

Source: Illustrations By the Author

For centuries, the female body was depicted primarily as an object of observation and contemplation, often from a male perspective. Feminist art has challenged these representations, transforming the body into a space for expression, self-affirmation and social critique Chadwick (2020). From the second half of the 20th century onwards, various artists began to use their own bodies as a medium for artistic expression, exploring issues relating to identity, gender, sexuality, motherhood and personal experiences. The body thus ceased to be merely a represented object and became an instrument through which women could assert their subjectivity and challenge social norms. According to Jones (1998), the use of the body in contemporary art enables us to understand identity as something constructed through social, cultural and bodily experiences. In this context, the body can also be understood as a space of resistance; by questioning standards of beauty and traditional models of femininity, female artists challenge representations that have historically limited women's autonomy and identity.

The exposure of the body, its transformation or the representation of aspects considered socially inappropriate can function as strategies for protest and for asserting autonomy. In this way, the representation of the female body in contemporary art transcends the aesthetic dimension, taking on a political and social dimension. The body becomes simultaneously a site of experience, identity construction and resistance, enabling artists to question power relations and propose new ways of understanding femininity and identity Pollock (1988), Jones (1998),.

SYMBOLISM BETWEEN NATURE AND WOMEN'S ARTISTIC CREATION

Nature plays a significant role in women's artistic creation, often being used as a means of expressing experiences, emotions, memories and issues relating to identity. Elements such as flowers, plants, animals and landscapes can transcend their aesthetic function, taking on symbolic meanings associated with life, transformation, fragility and resilience. In this sense, nature can function as a language through which artists express individual experiences and establish connections with the social and cultural context in which they are embedded Pollock (1988).

The symbolism is also an important resource in the construction of meaning. Through the use of objects, colours, natural elements and cultural references, female artists can represent aspects of the female experience that are not necessarily directly visible. These elements enable them to address themes such as identity, memory, the body, motherhood and gender relations, creating different levels of interpretation of the work Chadwick (2020).

The use of nature and symbolism thus enables a connection to be made between personal experience and broader social issues. By drawing on these elements, the artists not only depict the outside world, but also construct new narratives about the female experience. Nature and symbols thus become tools for expression and reflection, contributing to the affirmation of identities in the context of traditional representations of women in art Pollock (1988).

MENDIETA AND 'THE SEASONS': THE CYCLE OF NATURE AND FEMALE IDENTITY

Ana Mendieta repeatedly explored the relationship between the human body and nature, using natural elements to address issues of identity, memory, belonging and ancestry. In *Five Seasons*, this relationship can be understood through the idea of transformation and continuity, linking natural cycles to the human experience Viso (2004). Nature thus takes on a symbolic and spiritual dimension, becoming an integral part of the artistic process.

Mendieta's interdisciplinary practice combined performance, photography, film and interventions in the landscape associated with *earth-body art*. In the Silhouette series, begun in 1973, the artist used her own body or its imprint on the landscape, creating a symbolic fusion between body and nature. These works reflect issues relating to identity, exile, belonging and cultural memory Viso (2004), Blocker (1999). The use of organic materials and ephemeral processes allows us to understand Mendieta's art as a link between the body and the natural environment. Her work has also been analysed in the context of the relationships between feminism, the body and nature, although the artist's direct association with ecofeminism should be viewed critically, as her work transcends rigid theoretical classifications Jacob (1991).

In this sense, *Five Seasons* and the *Silueta* series highlight a conception of artistic creation based on transformation and on the relationship between the body, nature and memory. Mendieta's work thus contributes to broadening contemporary discourses on female identity, exile, ancestry and the relationship with the natural world, demonstrating how the body can function simultaneously as artistic material, a space of memory and an instrument of identity affirmation Blocker (1999), Viso (2004). In this context, *Five Seasons* can be interpreted as a metaphor for constantly evolving female creativity, reaffirming the relationship between the body, nature and the cycles of life's renewal.

Figure 3

Figure 3 Images by Yagul (from the 'Silueta' series) (1972), (1973), (1974) and (1976)
Source: https://smarthistory.org/ana-mendieta-silueta-series/

Ana Mendieta's contribution to contemporary art thus reveals the capacity of artistic practice to create a space for critical reflection on the human condition, identity and our relationship with the environment. Her work has helped to broaden contemporary discourses on the body, gender, memory and nature, establishing an artistic language in which individual experience is intertwined with cultural and social issues.

ALPHONSE MUCHA AND 'THE SEASONS': THE SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMININE

Alphonse Mucha's series *The Seasons* (1896) is one of the most iconic works of Art Nouveau, exemplifying the allegorical representation of the female figure. The success of the series led Mucha to subsequently create further versions of the same theme, in 1897 and 1900.

Comprising four panels — Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter — the series associates each season of the year with a female figure surrounded by natural elements, in a composition characterised by sinuous lines, floral ornamentation and a harmonious colour palette. In *The Seasons*, the woman is presented as a personification of nature and its cycles of renewal, abundance, maturity and retreat. Each figure embodies specific characteristics of the season she represents, establishing a symbolic relationship between the female body and the natural world.

Spring evokes rebirth and youth; summer suggests fulfilment, vitality and sensuality; autumn symbolises the harvest and maturity; whilst winter conveys serenity and introspection. From an artistic perspective, Mucha emphasises the elegance and idealisation of the female form, incorporating it into decorative compositions that have become a hallmark of Art Nouveau aesthetics.

Figure 4

Figure 4 The Seasons Series (1896), Alphonse Mucha
Source: https://museums.eu/article/details/108761/daily-art-story-muchas-seasons

Women are depicted in an idealised and delicate manner, with long, wavy hair, surrounded by flowers and plant motifs. Mucha uses curved lines, harmonious colours, ornamental forms and natural motifs – striking features of the Art Nouveau aesthetic.

The series highlights feminine beauty, nature and symbolism, transforming the four seasons into poetic and decorative figures. Mucha transforms the seasons into characters, combining nature, femininity and ornamentation. The decorative composition and defined contours are fundamental elements of his style.

Figure 5

Figure 5 The Seasons series (1897), Alphonse Mucha
Source: https://museums.eu/article/details/108761/daily-art-story-muchas-seasons

A striking example of the Art Nouveau style, the work is characterised by elegance, inspiration drawn from nature, and the use of plants and flowers. The soft colours and circular, decorative composition convey a sense of beauty, delicacy, and balance through the four figures; at the same time, Mucha alludes to the cycle of life and the passage of time.

Figure 5

Figure 6 The Seasons series (1990), Alphonse Mucha.
Source: https://museums.eu/article/details/108761/daily-art-story-muchas-seasons

T Zodiac depicts the connection between humankind, nature and the universe. The signs of the zodiac symbolise the cycle of time and the influence of the stars on human life. The woman, depicted at the centre of the composition, symbolises beauty and harmony, whilst the floral and ornamental elements reinforce the connection with nature.

The work thus conveys a sense of harmony between human beauty, nature and the cosmos, a hallmark of Mucha's Art Nouveau aesthetic.

Figure 7

Figure 7 Zodiac (1896), Alphonse Mucha
Source: https://museums.eu/article/details/108761/daily-art-story-muchas-seasons

Figure 8

Figure 8 Zodiac (1896), Alphonse Mucha
Source: https://www.muchafoundation.org/en/gallery

In this context, nature plays a fundamental role, enveloping the figures and reinforcing the association between the feminine, beauty, fertility and natural cycles. However, from a contemporary perspective, the series can also be analysed critically as an ideal of beauty and a symbol of nature.

This representation reflects cultural and social values characteristic of the late nineteenth century, a period in which the female figure was frequently associated with delicacy, sensuality, fertility and the natural world. In this way, *The Seasons* enables us to understand how the image of women was used in art as an aesthetic, allegorical and symbolic element, contributing to the construction of certain conceptions of the feminine.

Mucha's visual language also reveals the influence of Japanese aesthetics, particularly in the arrangement and composition of the figures and the integration of decorative and natural elements.

This influence can be observed in other works by the artist, notably **The Five Senses*, contributing to the development of an aesthetic characterised by stylisation and ornamentation and by the celebration of the female figure. In this sense, **The Seasons** constitutes an important starting point for understanding the historical association between the feminine and nature in Western art.

The idealisation of women as a representation of natural cycles subsequently allows us to draw a contrast with the work of female artists of the 20th and 21st centuries, who have come to question these representations and call for new ways of approaching the female body, identity and experience.

"THE FIVE SENSES": ALLEGORY, SYMBOLISM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE FEMININE

Hans Makart's cycle *The Five Senses* (*Die fünf Sinne*), painted between 1872 and 1879, is a significant example of 19th-century allegorical painting. The five paintings depict the five senses through female figures, drawing on an iconographic tradition that developed from the Renaissance and the Baroque periods Nordenfalk (1985), Jongeneel (2016). The rich colour palette, ornamental elements and depiction of the female body highlight the luxurious and sensual character typical of Makart's work (Husslein-Arco & Klee, 2011). The female figure fulfils both an allegorical and an aesthetic function: she personifies abstract concepts, yet is presented as an object of contemplation.

This dimension can be analysed in the light of feminist studies of representation, particularly through the notion of the 'male gaze', which allows us to problematise the construction of the female body as a visual object Berger (1972), Mulvey (1975).

As such, the work reflects the cultural values of the 19th century; she was depicted often as a muse, an allegory or a symbol of beauty and sensuality. An analysis of *The Five Senses* therefore enables a dialogue to be established between the European artistic tradition and contemporary approaches to gender and representation. Whilst Makart uses the female body to embody universal concepts, later artists began to embrace the female body and experience as means of self-representation and affirmation of identity Nochlin (1971), Pollock (1988). The work thus highlights the gradual transformation of women from objects of representation to subjects and agents of artistic creation.

Figure 9

Figure 9 The Five Senses: Hans Makart
Source: https://arthistory.co/the-five-senses-hans-makart/

In the context of social and rights-based inequalities, as well as the growing appreciation of nature, human rationality has been called into question in response to environmental transformations and the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system. It is within this context that the work of the artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) can be situated. Her installation Tree of Life (1979) establishes a symbolic relationship between the body, nature, and fertility, problematizing the boundaries between the human and the natural world.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN PAINTING

An analysis of the representation of women in painting shows that art constitutes a privileged space for the construction, expression and transformation of cultural and social identities.

Throughout the history of art, the female figure has been widely used as a symbol of beauty, allegory and aesthetic ideal, reflecting the values, social norms and cultural conventions of the periods in which the works were produced Berger (1972), Nochlin (1988). Throughout the history of art, the representation of women has been associated with a predominantly male gaze, in which the female body was presented as an object of contemplation and desire Berger (1972).

This perspective can be observed in various artistic movements and contexts, notably in the work of artists such as Alphonse Mucha and Hans Makart. In Mucha's works, the female figure often takes on an idealised and decorative dimension, associated with beauty, nature and sensuality – striking characteristics of the Art Nouveau aesthetic. For his part, Hans Makart developed a style of painting characterised by historicity, glamour and theatricality, frequently drawing on the female figure as an element of aesthetic idealisation. These representations demonstrate how the image of women in art is linked to the cultural and social values of each historical period Chadwick (2020).

Conversely, the growing visibility of women artists from the second half of the 20th century onwards redefined the role of women in the art world. Women gradually came to be recognised as creative individuals and key figures in cultural production. This transformation was linked to the social and cultural changes brought about by feminist movements, as well as to academic research that challenged traditional models of art history. Nochlin (1971) analysis was fundamental in challenging the absence of women from the traditional narrative of art history, demonstrating that this invisibility did not stem from a supposed lack of talent, but from social, educational and institutional barriers, which, historically, have limited women's access to training and artistic careers. The work of artists such as Ana Mendieta, Frida Kahlo, Paula Rego and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva demonstrates the diversity of artistic languages, experiences and perspectives present in art created by women.

Through self-portraiture, Frida Kahlo explored issues relating to the body, identity, pain, personal experience and Mexican culture. Her work demonstrates how the female body can cease to be merely an object of representation and become a means of expressing the artist's own subjectivity Kettenmann (2003). Ana Mendieta developed a performative artistic practice centred on the relationship between the body, nature, memory and identity. Her performances and interventions in the landscape also address issues relating to exile, belonging and cultural experience, using the body and its traces as instruments for constructing meaning Viso (2004). Although this analysis focuses primarily on painting, the inclusion of Mendieta helps us to understand that the representation of the feminine transcends the boundaries of traditional painting and manifests itself through different visual art forms. Paula Rego also offers a critical approach to the representation of women, exploring themes such as motherhood, sexuality, violence, power relations and social inequalities. Her female characters often depart from idealised and passive representations of women, presenting complex subjects capable of expressing conflict, resistance and autonomy McEwen (1997). Her work thus highlights art's capacity to challenge social norms and bring to light female experiences that have been marginalised.

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva contributed to the establishment of a distinctive artistic language within the context of modern and contemporary art, particularly in the field of abstraction. Her work engages with issues of memory, perception and the experience of space, demonstrating the significance of her contribution to artistic modernity. Her career also enables us to move beyond a view of women's artistic production that is limited to themes directly related to gender, recognising women as key agents in the transformation of modern and contemporary art Chadwick (2020).

In this context, the appreciation of women's artistic output contributes to a more critical, inclusive and comprehensive understanding of art history, promoting the recognition of artists and works that have long remained invisible or been marginalised. Feminist research in art history has demonstrated that the criteria used to determine what is considered relevant in the artistic field are not neutral, but are linked to social, institutional and cultural structures Pollock (1988).

Research into women's art thus reveals that creativity and sensitivity cannot be understood as characteristics determined by gender, but rather as dimensions of human and artistic experience that take different forms in historical and cultural contexts. Whilst gender may influence the conditions under which works are produced, circulated and received, it does not determine the quality or artistic value of a work Nochlin (1971), Pollock (1988).

The growing visibility of women in painting and the visual arts represents a significant transformation in the contemporary art scene and contributes to the construction of a History of Art that is more equitable and representative of cultural diversity. The

creativity and innovation present in artistic production by women transcend gender stereotypes and assert themselves as fundamental elements of critical reflection on society. Thus, promoting awareness and appreciation of art produced by women constitutes an important step towards the recognition of diversity, equal opportunities and the enrichment of artistic and cultural heritage.

ART AS A MEANS OF CONSTRUCTING FEMALE IDENTITY

Art provides an important space for the construction and affirmation of female identity, enabling women to express their personal, cultural and social experiences. Throughout the history of art, the representation of the feminine has often been shaped by models and values defined by a predominantly male perspective Berger (1972). The growing participation of women as artists has helped to transform this reality, giving them the opportunity to represent their own bodies, their experiences and their identities from their own perspective Nochlin (1971). Artists such as Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, Paula Rego and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva demonstrate different forms of artistic creation as a means of reflecting on identity, memory, gender, the body, belonging and experience. Their works reveal that female identity is not universal, but is constructed through individual experiences, social relationships, cultural contexts and memories Chadwick (2020).

Frida Kahlo frequently explored the body, pain, identity and personal experience through painting, transforming aspects of her own life into artistic material. Ana Mendieta, for her part, used the body, nature and her relationship with the earth to address issues of identity, exile, belonging and gender. Paula Rego developed a critical visual language through which she questioned the social roles assigned to women and power relations. Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, meanwhile, through abstraction and complex spatial structures, constructed her own artistic language, relating to memory, experience and the perception of space Chadwick (2020), Lamas (2018).

In this way, art created by women transcends the aesthetic dimension, also taking on a critical and transformative role. By challenging stereotypes and traditional representations of women, these artists contribute to the development of a more inclusive history of art Nochlin (1971), Pollock (1988). Women's artistic production thus enables us to reclaim experiences and perspectives that have long been marginalised, demonstrating that art history must take into account the diversity of voices, identities and experiences that contribute to the construction of visual culture.

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FINAL REMARKS

An analysis of women's presence in art history reveals that their limited visibility is not due to a lack of artistic ability, but to the social, cultural, and institutional conditions, which, for centuries, have restricted their participation in the artistic field. The feminist perspective has helped to challenge these structures and to bring to light artists and practices that had been marginalised by traditional narratives Nochlin (1971), Pollock (1988). In this context, the transformation of women from objects to subjects of representation constitutes one of the key changes observed in the artistic field. The female body, previously depicted mainly from a male perspective, has come to be used by female artists themselves as a tool for self-representation, affirmation of identity, and

resistance. The artistic exploration of the body has made it possible to address issues relating to gender, sexuality, motherhood, beauty standards, and power relations, demonstrating that bodily representation also has a social and political dimension Jones (1998), Chadwick (2020).

Natural and symbolic elements can also take on meanings related to identity, memory, and the female experience, going beyond their purely aesthetic function. They constitute resources through which artists can construct individual and collective narratives, express personal and shared experiences, and explore forms of artistic creation that challenge traditional modes of representation.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has demonstrated that the representation of the feminine in art is linked to historical, cultural and symbolic constructs that go beyond the purely aesthetic dimension of the images. The association between women and nature, identified as one of the main axes of analysis in this study, has proved to be a social construct consolidated throughout Western tradition, through discourses that have linked the feminine to the body, reproduction and fertility.

In Sherry B. Ortner's contribution, it has become clear that the opposition between nature and culture constitutes a fundamental symbolic structure in the construction of gender differences. An analysis of feminist criticism in art history, drawing on the work of Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, has shown that the absence of women in traditional art discourses does not stem from a lack of artistic production, but from the institutional and cultural structures that determined who could create, be recognised and be included in the artistic canon.

The study of artists such as Alphonse Mucha, Hans Makart, Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, Paula Rego and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva highlights the diversity of artistic languages and perspectives present in artistic creation. Their works address issues relating to identity, memory, the body, nature, gender and society, demonstrating that artistic production by women cannot be reduced to a single, homogeneous aesthetic category. In this sense, the recognition of women's artistic production contributes to a more critical and inclusive understanding of art history, enabling the rediscovery of trajectories that have long remained invisible.

The contributions of Norman Bryson and Anne Cauquelin have strengthened our understanding of the artistic image as a product shaped by systems of representation, visual conventions and specific historical contexts. The incorporation of ecofeminist perspectives has enabled this analysis to be broadened, highlighting the links between the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women as phenomena associated with cultural models based on hierarchical dualisms. An analysis of the relationship between the feminine and nature thus highlights the capacity of artistic production to challenge historical narratives, gender representations and power relations. In turn, nature and symbolic elements serve as resources through which experiences, memories and meanings associated with female identity and the female condition are expressed Pollock (1988), Chadwick (2020). It can be concluded that the study of the representation of the feminine in painting goes beyond a purely aesthetic analysis of the works, and serves as a tool for understanding the relationships between art, society, culture and power. The integration of different theoretical perspectives, combined with a recognition of women's contributions to the world's artistic heritage, reinforces the need to continue developing research that broadens our understanding of the diversity of artistic creation and contributes to a more representative, inclusive and scientifically rigorous history of art.

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