

Women as Objects in Art and Life

by Michael Curtis



The Rape of Europa by Titian

In the present social climate the daily reports of sexual assaults on women testify to the extent to which men have been exercising power in relation to women, and treating women as sex objects. Sex can be an exchange of mutual pleasure, but it has also been the vehicle for the exercise of masculine power rather than mutual enjoyment. This exercise has been illustrated in art , in a new exhibition by works of Titian

and in life with the recent allegations of the conduct of Andrew Cuomo and Prince Andrew.

On August 3, 2021, the Office of the Attorney General, State of New York, concluded in its report that Governor Andrew M. Cuomo had engaged in conduct constituting sexual harassment under federal and NY state law. The 56th governor of NY had sexually harassed a number of employees by unwelcome and unwanted touching and made numerous offensive comments of a suggestive and sexual nature that created a hostile work environment for women. The issue is pertinent to the ongoing discourse about the relationship of sexual assault and power. The NY report said that the culture of fear and intimidation in the Cuomo office, the normalization of inappropriate comments and interactions , and the poor enforcement of policies and safeguards, contributed to the sexual harassment, retaliation, and the overall hostile work environment. Cuomo was not truly contrite after the report was published. The Governor in a bizarre non-apology announced on August 10, 2021, that “the best way I can help now is if I step aside and let government get back to governing. In a pitiful statement he said he did not “realize the line had been redrawn.”

Optimistically, the hope is that future Cuomos will recognize and act in accordance with the new line.

Similarly, Prince Andrew has been accused of sexual assault and a civil suit for damages has been filed against him in a NY court for having abused a female under the age of 18. The case affirms that his alleged behavior is not acceptable and cannot hide behind wealth and power. It appears that both Andrew and Cuomo, objectionable, pompous, arrogant, have been found guilty in the court of public opinion.

Since the advent of #Me Too, attitudes about the relationship between sexual activity and power have been under the microscope, with the assumption that what was once acceptable is now disparaged. Proponents of #Me Too assert their

position is not a vindictive plot against men, but one of providing support for survivors of sexual violence. However, critics, notably the famous actress Catherine Deneuve and a group of about 100 female French celebrities, have called this a wave of purification and excessive, and even defended the right of men to harass women in the name of the tradition of "phallocentric seduction." Their argument is that rape is a crime, but flirtation and trying to seduce someone is not, nor is trying to steal a kiss, or sending sexually charged messages to women who did not return their attentions. They hold that social media campaigns to shame men accused of harassing women, have sometimes gone too far."

There is nothing unclear about the behavior of Cuomo and Prince Andrew, but a more troubling question, relating to the tension between art and current morality and ethical codes, is posed by an unusual exhibition titled "Titian: Women, Myth and Power" that has opened at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Indirectly, it poses the question, should culture be purged of works of art that might offend public sensibilities, in this instance sexual assault against women.

The exhibition consists of six paintings, a series of large composition that Titian called "poesie," vaguely translated as poetic inventions, based on episodes in the epic poem, *The Metamorphoses*, by the Roman poet Ovid, 43 BC to 17 AD. The paintings are metaphors of the interaction between gods playing havoc with the lives of mortals, fatal encounters set in enchanting landscape, tales of love, passion, and death, eroticism and power. Diana locked in a high tower is impregnated by Jupiter who transforms himself into gold dust. The myths are dark. Jupiter becomes a bull to rape Europa, the innocent Actaeon is turned by Diana into a stag and torn to pieces by his own dogs, simply for the crime of seeing her naked while bathing. Jupiter, a serial philanderer, seduces Danae and Callisto. Only once is there a happy story, when Andromeda is saved by the hero Perseus.

The series was produced for Philip II of Spain, and were originally displayed in a single room in the palace in Madrid. The collection is the result of one of the greatest artist-patron collaborations in history, between Titian, then the most famous artist in the world, and Philip who gave the artist complete independence. Philip, often called Philip the prudent, was ruler of a large empire, king of Spain and a number of other territories, including as King Consort of Queen Mary Tudor 1554-58, a fervent Roman Catholic and champion of Catholic counter-revolution. One of his acts was to launch the Armada. Philip is recognized today as the central character, sympathetically portrayed, in Verdi's opera "Don Carlos." He was the patron of art and literature in the Spanish Golden Age.

This show of mythological paintings, one of the most influential group of mythological paintings in Western art, made in the 1550s and 1560s, each an encounter between a divinity and a mortal, are acknowledged masterpieces of art, with variety of pose, expressive subjects, physical sensations, use of symbols, and rich colorism. But the dominant theme of the cycle of six is one of sexual assaults on women, of violence and rape. The dilemma is whether this art, emphasizing female flesh and dramatizing male domination, is acceptable in our present moral climate. The paintings are erotic, seen through what has been termed "the male gaze." They raise disturbing questions.

The Titian paintings are based on gazes, individuals seeing others and the consequences of the event. For at least 50 years feminist art historians have commented that power in art is expressed through the male gaze, depicting the image of the nude woman as an ideal of beauty, but also as a sex object valued for the pleasure of the male viewer. Jean-Paul Sartre introduced the concept of *le regard*, the gaze, in which the act of gazing at a person creates a power difference because the person being gazed at is seen as an object, not a human

being. Michael Foucault used the concept of the gaze to illustrate socio-political power relations.

The image of the nude as sex object is familiar in art from Giorgione to Picasso. Women are positioned as objects of heterosexual male desires. Classical paintings embody this perspective, the power of men over women as an inherent value. However, this perspective has challenged over the last fifty years by artists, such as Alice Neel and Joan Semmel, presenting a views of the female body that reflects real life rather than the idealized erotic figure of the male gaze.

Nevertheless, in view of contemporary behavior, the question should be posed, should today's morality be considered in viewing the paintings from the past, even those regarded as classical masterpieces? Titian, like so many dealt with violent subjects, and portrayed abuse of women, creating images that resonate differently today than when they were produced.