

Women in the Art of Ancient Greece

Women having to earn their place and having the ability to exist without serving or being important to men is nothing new. This notion finds itself in many different places in history, such as Ancient Greece. Women in Greek art are almost always depicted as goddesses, rarely is it seen that women are depicted as common people or even as children. It is as if they are not allowed to exist unless they are serving a purpose, and are not afforded the same ability to make mistakes and be reckless as their male counterparts (the gods). It is also common that women are depicted clothed, unlike men who often are nude and this male nudity is seen as normal and heroic. However, when the same nudity is depicted on female figures it has an entirely different context. The depiction of women in Ancient Greek art reflects how women have been viewed.

One statue that displays how women are only important through their association with men is the Kore of Nikandre from Delos Nikandre (c. 650-625 BCE.). On the statue, it is inscribed “dedicated me to the goddess, far-shooter of arrows, Nikandre, the daughter of Deinodikos of Naxos, distinguished among women, sister of Deinomenes and wife of Phraxos.” She is described by her relationship with the men around her. Which is more important than who she is and what she’s done. Furthermore, the inscription on the statue is worded in a way that makes it sound as if she is distinguished among women mainly because of her relation to the men in her life, not because of who she was. The Kore of Nikandre also demonstrates another popular motif among women in Ancient Greek art which is how women are often depicted in less intimidating poses and stances (Brendle). The kore is depicted standing still with the arms at the side of the body, this contrasts with kouroi which are typically depicted with one foot in

front of the other which gives off a feeling of assertiveness. This same assertiveness is not felt by looking at the kore.

The birth of Athena, on the east pediment of the Parthenon, is an example of Ancient Greek art that shows how women have to serve a purpose. When she is born, Athena is already a full-grown adult and is completely dressed in armor (Pillott, 94-95). At birth, she had already been assigned to her role and not been awarded the opportunity to grow up and be reckless in the same way the gods were. This is a commonality among most female figures in Ancient Greek art, it is as if women can only exist if they are serving a purpose, they cannot just simply exist.

An art piece that reflects how women were not awarded the same ability to make mistakes as men are The Medusa at the Temple of Artemis in Corfu. This figure of Medusa tells her story and how she was raped by the god Poseidon in the Temple of Athena and as a punishment was turned into a Gorgon (*TheCollector*). The story of Medusa as a whole conveys the notion that women were not allowed to make mistakes in the same way that men can. To portray this, in the Temple of Artemis, the figure of Medusa is seen as this strange-looking monster. She is the physical embodiment of the consequences of making a 'mistake'.

The Aphrodite of Melos breaks away from the convention of women being depicted fully clothed in Ancient Greek art. Instead, the figure is seen as mostly nude and holding onto a cloth that is draped off of her hips (Beazley, J. D., and Bernard Ashmole). Although the depiction of male figures nude is the norm, the nudity of Aphrodite is almost controversial as it has an entirely different context in comparison to that of male nudity. Unlike the way nudity is seen in men, which is a sign of heroism and strength, the nudity of the figure of Aphrodite is

contextualized by the modesty and innocence women were expected to have (Brendle). The figure appears to be attempting to hold the cloth in front of her, which displays this emphasis on modesty. Contrarily, the nudity of male figures is not 'acknowledged' by the figure, therefore making the nudity seem normal and as if it is supposed to be that way. The statue of Aphrodite is centered around her nudity, and it is as if the figure seems to be aware of her nudity and it is the focal point of the statue.

Female figures in the art of Ancient Greece convey the views on and beliefs about women of that time period. Women were often depicted as less intimidating and assertive in comparison to figures of men. There is seemingly this double standard of nudity between men and women. Male nudity makes them strong and heroic while female nudity has to do with their modesty and innocence. This view on women is still found in the current day and all throughout history, more in some cultures and time periods than others.

Work Cited

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