

Sculpting Gender Relationships: Classical Idealization in Pygmalion and Galatea (1813-19)



Photo by: Kaz on Pixabay

Research Question

To what extent does a 19th century work involve the classical idealization of nature?

Abstract

The extent to which idealization is visible in Anne-Louis Girodet's classical painting *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1813-19), is explored through the critique of classical elements and a comparison to an earlier, biblically based work, Palma Vecchio's painting *Adam and Eve*. The flawless depiction of their ivory bodies moves away from a model of realism in order to embellish subjects and reinforce traditional gender roles. Comfortable within the literary canon, the myth of Pygmalion involves the creation of the ideal woman which displays physical features, such as a tiny waist and glowing skin, that continue to be viewed as desirable today. The depiction of the myth presents a power struggle between man and woman, and man and religion, through Pygmalion's creation of his ideal woman with divine intervention.

Method

Principles and elements of design and the consultation of secondary research on the piece and painter, through the Scott library website, were applied to form an analysis of the painting. This involved comparing and contrast male and female representations within the painting and comparing the composition to an earlier biblical work Palma Vecchio's *Adam and Eve*.



Photo retrieved from: <http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=114689>

Analysis

The nature of the relationships between figures and the way their bodies are embellished, moves away from a mode of realism. Painted during the Bourbon Restoration in post-revolutionary France, the neoclassical piece is a linear closed composition with planar subjects. Common of a classical piece, the ivory complexion of the bodies represents good health and purity. Pygmalion creates his ideal woman but also a complicated power relationship as Galatea is both superior and inferior to Pygmalion, not equal (Montgomery). Galatea is worshipped like a god (Wettlaufer), seen by her physical superiority on a pedestal, and at the command of her creator Pygmalion for she owes him her life. Blemish free bodies appear perfect according to our social ideas of binary body stereotypes as Pygmalion has muscular arms and Galatea has a slim figure with wide hips.

Conclusion

Elements of classical idealization within the composition include the visual perfection of subjects by beautifying bodies, the moment depicted, and bodies displayed in the nude. Art is history's camera, capturing both factual events through portrait and social attitudes by depicting stories. The classical idealization, the movement away from realism in order to embellish or perfect perception (Grosskurth), present in the painting demonstrates the construction and reinforcement of the same binary gender relationships experienced in western society today.