Politics and Aesthetics of the Female Form, 1908–1918

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Introduction: Women in the Frame

At the beginning of the twentieth century, 'a first generation of educated women sought to correct an historical record that had left them out'.[1] Although often a complicated association, the ties connecting women with modernity nonetheless served to empower them into understanding their position within the changing cultural landscape.[2] *Politics and Aesthetics of the Female Form, 1908–1918*, examines how the pictorial representation of women in Great Britain during this decade contributes to this positioning, including the ways in which women pictorially represented themselves. Historical periods and events are uniquely exposed through the artwork of the era; by considering visual constructs and pictorial tropes as mechanisms by which certain artworks can be analysed, alternative perspectives are provoked and previously considered explanations and analyses re-evaluated. This book is an art-historical work, with the objective of demonstrating cultural and political impact on contemporary perceptions with regard to imagery of the female form.

Studies within the field of visual culture 'provide the possibility of unframing some of the discussions we have been engaged in regarding presences and absences, invisibility and stereotypes, desires, reifications and objectifications from the disciplinary fields… which first articulated their status as texts and objects'.[3] Conversations around the art-historical as a method of cultural examination exposes points of view related not only to the artwork as an object, but also to the elemental objects contained within each image. Artworks can be expressive of personal, public, or political narrative,[4] but that is not to say the creation and utilisation

of art to dispute previously held suppositions is risk-free; female artists have always fought exclusion, confronting 'limited options, public anger and professional scorn' alongside 'condemnation and censorship'.[5] Nevertheless, female artists have consistently opted for 'audacious action over safe acceptance', enticing risk in pursuing 'political expression', seeking 'provocative subjects' and, importantly, 'giving a voice to the voiceless'.[6] When this is expanded, a clear dichotomy can be seen between woman as artist and woman as subject, even when the latter role is facilitated by other women. It is this considered pictorial representation of women that forms the basis of this book as a means by which this era of history can be supplementally explored.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, 'the arguments in art criticism and art history' in respect of female artists 'centred around two critical questions: what are the qualities of women artists' work … and what is the relationship of women's work to contemporary concepts of femininity?'[7] Although the quality of women's artwork during the prescribed era has some bearing on the aims and objectives of this exploration, of more import is what it was women wanted portrayed and how this may or may not differ from the actuality of their pictorial representation. This is pertinent because during the decade that forms the temporal context of this book many women were fighting both for and against a "feminine" perception, in the sense that in certain circumstances women's femininity was often used to undermine them. One principal example of this is the opposition women encountered in their fight for equality and which occurred both textually and pictorially. This aspect runs parallel to an exploitation of women's femininity, including in advertising and in imagery employed by the State during the First World War. These dual perspectives are explored throughout, taking into account decisions the women concerned needed to make regarding what they could use to their advantage, and what aspects, when they had control over the situation, they selected to specifically fight against. In respect of suffrage movements, art historian Lisa Tickner believes the related imagery was 'Too "artistic" for the interests of political history' and 'too political (and too ephemeral) for the history of art',[8] an observation that can equally be applied to pictorial posters, postcards, pamphlets and banners associated with other propagandist campaigns, including those connected to the First World War. This pictorial archive has not particularly featured even in documented histories specific to pictorial propaganda, nor in those of women working as artists and designers,[9] but is an

omission that continues to be productively addressed as this combined genre of art history and visual culture, alongside gender studies, forms a crucial part of contemporary enquiry.

More focused attention on gender studies and comprehensive analyses of feminist theory are areas debated more purposefully elsewhere, however, and do not form the central premise of this book. The emphasis of this particular exploration lies with the pictorial, and the highlighted images are selected specifically to meet the prescribed objectives. Nevertheless, the concern is not just with the more usual analysis pertaining to each image as an object, nor does this investigation centre solely on the genealogy of just one visual trope contained within that image. This book explores and focuses on combinations from within each of these areas and investigates their subsequent formation into a unique whole, acknowledging both commonalities and contrasts between certain representations of women during this decade. Tickner writes of the Artists' Suffrage League founded in 1907, and the Suffrage Atelier founded in 1909, and their ambition to produce 'representations… in the sense of actual images and pictures'.[10] However,

> images in this sense cannot be separated from images in the sense of mental representations, and concepts that may be put into words rather than pictures. All images are traversed by language, and images are also "texts" in which codes are operative and meanings are produced.[11]

This conjecture, which incorporates the ideas pertaining to a 'huge stock of images stored in the memory',[12] is relevant to this book in two respects: firstly, the idea of 'mental representations' relating to a whole, and secondly a more abstract consideration in the form of a sign or symbol; both are aspects explored more fully in this and later chapters. Although this examination does not concentrate on elements contained within an image in a way that might construe it as a work dedicated to semiotics, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's concept of a 'visible continuum'[13] could be said to fall into this latter category. The 'visible continuum' is, in effect, a means by which we can make tangible from within the past that which we cannot physically perceive. The eighteenth century artist William Hogarth documented theories relating to a serpentine curve he designated as a *line of beauty*,[14] and this *line* exemplifies a visual construct with a long genealogical legacy—a

visible continuum—regardless of whether it is discerned by the observer consciously or unconsciously (Fig. 1.1).

In respect of Hogarth's theorising, it is worth acknowledging that in the introduction to a 1955 edition of *The Analysis of Beauty*—Hogarth's published manuscript of 1753—art historian Joseph Burke writes that 'The serpentine line, which has proved a stumbling-block to so many readers of the *Analysis*, requires some introduction', despite it being 'as old as art itself'.[15] Hogarth's interest in the aesthetic legacy of the serpentine curve contributes to the ways in which his *line of beauty* can be considered as an example of a visible continuum, and subsequently be utilised as an analytical mechanism. Within *The Analysis of Beauty*, Hogarth writes of how 'objects' are contrived using a variety of lines but it is the addition of the serpentine line, particularly in 'human form', which has 'the power of super-adding grace to beauty'.[16] Such application to figurative imagery in general and the female form in particular is therefore pertinent to the examination undertaken here, especially when the *line of beauty* is recognised as a visual construct with an ability to attract the viewer. This is of relevance to artworks in general, but notably so when considered in respect of artworks created to command specific

Fig. 1.1 William Hogarth's *line of beauty*

attention and a subsequent productive response from the viewer. This includes advertising, as well as propagandist imagery as both suffrage and First World War artworks can be appraised. Examples of this are illustrated in Fig. 1.2, and the relationship between an attractional image and accompanying text that is either related or unrelated is explored within this book.

Hogarth expands upon his reasoning in relation to the *line of beauty* when he simultaneously references a *line of grace*.[17] This construct is a serpentine curve that in general is three-dimensional and not necessarily seen in its entirety—for example a *line* that dips in and out of vision as it curves around a sculptured figure. Hogarth reflects upon this, commenting on a utilisation within artworks where not all the *line* can be physically shown, meaning it often requires the aid of the imagination to continue through any breach.[18] Hogarth's theory relating to this point is certainly corroborated in respect of the *line*'s disappearance as perceived by the viewer, not only in the three-dimensional object, but also as viewed in the two-dimensional execution of something three-dimensional such as a female figure. Hogarth insists the *line of beauty* and the *line of grace* should be 'judiciously mixt'[19] however, and bearing in mind the *line of grace* as a separate concept has arguably all but been subsumed into that which surrounds the more commonly referred to *line of beauty*, it is the latter expression that is exclusively employed throughout this book.

Fig. 1.2 *Future* 2017 (© Georgina Williams)

Hogarth acknowledges the *line of beauty* as a construct with a genealogical heritage—one that has subliminally embedded itself within the memory of the observer[20]—and declares it indicative not only of movement, but movement at its most beautiful; Hogarth emphasises this when he writes of 'the pleasure of the pursuit'[21] and how the serpentining curve '*leads the eye a wanton kind of chace*' [italics in the original].[22] Consequently the *line of beauty* contributes to the accumulation of visual keys and codes coinciding as contributory constructs in the creation of a whole. This genealogical connection

> may or may not have a tangible effect, depending on whether traces are mobilized that are strong enough to take advantage of the structural weaknesses (ambiguities) in the perceived figure. It is a matter of the relative strength of the stimulus structure as compared with the structural strength of the pertinent traces.[23]

The application of this concept to pictorial representations of women within a viewer's memory bank is examined throughout this book; nevertheless, at this point an alternate perspective in relation to how these conscious and subconscious memories effect our perception of what we see should be considered. Baudrillard acknowledges that 'One can live with the idea of a distorted truth', yet 'metaphysical despair' is borne from the notion that the imagery obscures nothing—on the contrary, it reveals that these are not images but rather 'perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination'.[24] This concept can be applied to images of women which are not, from a literal perspective, "real"—as illustrated in contrived imagery that plays upon preconceived ideas and misconceptions in respect of the "ideal" woman. This is often found in advertising, and also includes the idea of a woman in peril who needs protecting, as demonstrated in certain strategies relating not only to First World War pictorial propaganda but also to some pictorial manifestations connected to the suffrage movements. Baudrillard's assertion that what is provoked by 'simulation' is the extinction of truth[25] is a theory that can be allied with the ways in which women wanted to be represented during this era as opposed to how they actually were. This incorporates stylistic influences pertaining to representations by both female and male artists, and is an aspect explored throughout the following chapters.

Conflictions inevitably arise through reasoned debate, with the result that

> The relationship between intellectual knowledge and visual representation is frequently misunderstood. Some theorists talk as though an abstract concept could be directly rendered in a picture; others deny that theoretical knowledge can do anything but disturb pictorial conception. The truth would seem to be that some abstract propositions can be translated into visual form and as such become a genuine part of a visual conception.[26]

When considering artwork within the cultural and temporal context specific to this book, this supposition is of significance because of the crucial role played by the aesthetic and theoretical output of movements such as Vorticism, Futurism and Cubism. Vorticism, the British art movement founded by Percy Wyndham Lewis, was alone in being a pre-First World War, avant-garde Western European movement to count women within its numbers.[27] Two of these female artists, Jessica Dismorr and Helen Saunders, were signatories to the Vorticist Manifesto circulated via the first edition of the movement's publication *Blast* in 1914.[28] The writer Paul Peppis remarks that the ten years leading up to the outbreak of war bore witness to 'an unprecedented surge of artistic activity across Europe', adding that 'the avant-garde was cosmopolitan from inception'.[29] Peppis continues:

> A generation of young artists and writers, sympathetic to aesthetic and social revolution and stimulated by the Cubists' experimental painting style and the Futurists' promotional and performative strategies, rapidly initiated their own rebellious art movements in nearly every European metropolis.[30]

It is this cosmopolitanism that justifies the inclusion of continental-European-based art movements such as Futurism and Cubism within a study with a primarily British stance; Futurism was founded by an Italian, the writer and art theorist F. T. Marinetti, and the movement significantly influenced the British art world, including C. R. W. Nevinson. Margaret Wynne Nevinson, the artist's mother who was actively involved in suffragism, responded to a speech given by Marinetti at the Lyceum Club for Women in London, observing how the women present at the meeting, 'like *Mona Lisa* of old, smiled and smiled the while she listened to the "same old story"' [italics in the original].[31] Without even taking into account the content of this particular 'story' the concept can be seen to correlate with how our visual perceptions are shaped by genealogical traces,

expanding upon the premise to include an image alongside signs and symbols as a 'mental representation' of a whole. In this context there exists a seeming requirement for women to be equated with symbolic imagery within the observer's imagination, including connecting them to historic figures and despite this practice—whether expressed by male or female artists and theorists—effectively attributing labels to the women concerned.
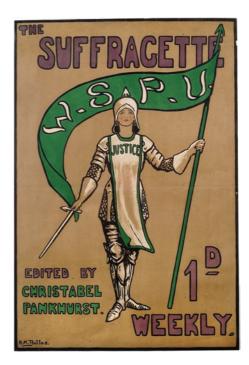
It is suggested that women were situated 'in a contradictory position within the formation of modernist ideologies: on the one hand they were emblematic of the primitive and mythologised zone of eternal femininity, on the other they were seen as subject to specifically feminine frailties in the face of the modern world'.[32] When this is explored from a Futurists' perspective as just one contemporaneous viewpoint, the *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman* published in 1912 could not be more specific: 'Women are the Erinyes, Amazons, Semiramides [sic], Joan of Arcs, Jeanne Hachettes; the Judiths and Charlotte Cordays, the Cleopatras and the Messalinas …'[33] The footnotes for the anthology in which this manifesto appears explain somewhat lengthily that

> The Erinnyes [sic] are the Greek goddesses/demons of vengeance, also called the Furies, who are given their classical treatment in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*; the Amazons were mythical female warriors of antiquity; Semiramis is the name of a queen of ancient Assyria, famous for her beauty, licentiousness, and prowess in war, and treated by Dante in *Inferno…* Jeanne Hachette is a French folk hero who seized a standard from besieging Burgundian troops in 1472. Judith is the exemplary Jewish hero from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible book named after her; she beheads Holofernes, an Assyrian commander besieging Bethulia, and saves the city. Charlotte Corday (1768–1793) assassinated the French revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat. Messalina (A.D. 22–48), third wife of the Roman emperor Claudius, was a byword for licentiousness and murderous intrigues [italics in the original].[34]

Six hundred years before the publication of this manifesto the Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375) included within his book *On Famous Women* mythological females as though they were real,[35] thereby emphasising how the genealogical thread incorporates the utilisation of female figures whether fact or fiction as signs or symbols, including within the art-historical. Furthermore it demonstrates the blurred line that can be seemingly discerned between the real and the unreal perceptions of women more generally, particularly in analyses undertaken by men, with the connotations of this conflation explored throughout this book.

The Futurists' often contradictory comments regarding women as documented in their manifestos are analysed for their relevance to the subject matter, including their own apparent need to connect a contemporary woman with a real or mythical female figure from the past. Evidence that this is not restricted to a masculine overview is demonstrated in examples of imagery borne from suffrage movements which similarly look at representations of women from history. These representations were utilised as a basis for their processional designs, included historic female figures such as Joan of Arc,[36] and were subsequently replicated in their own artwork. In 1912, Hilda M. Dallas created a poster to advertise *The Suffragette*, the newspaper of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) founded by Emmeline Pankhurst (Fig. 1.3). In this image Joan of Arc becomes "Justice", stepping forward to demonstrate her readiness for the battle, with the fight in this example being the enfranchisement of women. That 'Women's relationship to each other is frequently ignored, designated a non-subject',[37]

Fig. 1.3 *The Suffragette* 1912, Hilda Dallas (© Museum of London)

highlights how inter-women associations are brought into focus when considering suffrage artworks—works by women for the promotion of a predominantly women's movement and which concentrate on female rights and equality. Consequently, a desire to equate a contemporary woman with an historic, heroic female figure such as Joan of Arc can be seen as an understandable premise for these women to subscribe to.

The ways women are represented in pictorial propagandist material is further demonstrated in imagery related to the First World War. During this conflict there was to begin with a surge of very 'direct and patriotic posters aimed at men'; by the beginning of 1915, however, some of the posters began to effect 'a more subtle approach—targeting men via the women in their lives'.[38] The State's ambition was to direct the textual and pictorial messages to the women close to male civilians, be they mothers, wives or girlfriends, bombarding them with varying 'emotional appeals' in order for them to induce men to enlist in the services.[39] The division between the mythical and actual power of women, and the ways it was portrayed at the time—predominantly from a pictorial perspective—is a key aspect of this exploration. Of particular interest within this method is how one of the poster design variations quotes playwright William Shakespeare's character of Lady Macbeth in conveying its message, despite the absence within the poster of a pictorial manifestation of a female form. The concept that this contrived absence of a woman provokes as many questions as her presence (and which includes this particular example), forms part of the analysis within a following chapter, and feeds into the discourse surrounding a deliberate negation of women's contribution throughout history, including in art-historical narratives. Furthermore it endorses the observation that the perception of women, particularly in imagery of a so-called "ideal", is blurred by the morphing of the real and mythological, and utilised in text and image by both women and men: 'Strong and fierce personalities' that include 'Medea, Clytemnestra, Antigone, Hera, and Artemis' despite these being 'fictional characters',[40] as well as the very real figure of Joan of Arc as already acknowledged. Wynne Nevinson succinctly summarises this premise when she states that 'Whether she be the subject of praise or censure, woman is now, as always, man's most interesting topic',[41] and this is intriguingly observed in a Wyndham Lewis ink, pencil and watercolour work

from circa 1913. This artwork, titled *Portrait of an Englishwoman*, is described by art historian Richard Cork, who remarks how

> Lewis, true to his iconoclastic temperament, destroys all traces of his woman and replaces her with an arrangement of thick black bars, most of which ascend in a diagonal succession towards the top of the design. They suggest industrial girders, even gun-barrels, and their repetitive oblongs consciously refute the curves that are normally associated with the visual depiction of a female.[42]

Even when acknowledging the principles, aims and objectives of an aesthetic movement that consciously contributes to the construction of an artwork, there is still room for debate as to how this work can be productively interpreted by the viewer, all the while taking into account the concept of intentional fallacy. It could be surmised that it is, at the very least, difficult for a viewer to discern that the subject matter of this particular painting is a woman without the title, which is uncompromising in its signposting. It can be argued that few key visuals within one's memory would automatically suggest Lewis' work is a portrait—including for reasoning as theorised by Hogarth, who writes that there are 'strong prejudices in favour of straight lines, as constituting true beauty in the human form, where they never should appear'.[43] However, hypotheses relating to this aspect of interpretation, as well as further acknowledgement of the part a viewer's imagination plays in discerning the constructional elements of an image, are explored later in this book. Arguably the biggest question to consider is whether the apparent disguising of the feminine subject is rooted in a more dismissive attitude towards women in general, and one that clearly replaces the woman as subject with that of object. Along with the enquiry into individual, as well as movements' stated opinions in this regard, further consideration of Lewis' painting is undertaken as this book progresses.

The myriad ways in which women can be seen in the pictorial documentation of the era that survives, and which is often supported and endorsed by contemporaneous textual commentary, emphasises the long and sweeping curve from one extreme to the other to which women as both subject and object are firmly rooted. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, this book analyses and appraises, through pictorial media, the politics and aesthetics in the representation of women during the period 1908–1918, and the reasons behind focusing upon this particular

decade in the early twentieth century are elaborated upon in Chapter 2. During this turbulent period can be seen the fight for emancipation, as well as movement between the private and public spheres, especially in relation to a nation's requirements of women associated with the onset of the First World War. In addition are the technological advances which saw the rise of both periodicals and posters and the advertising stratagems distributed via these mediums. The pictorial poster in particular became a means of mass information-communication employed by the State,[44] and reflected innovations in pictorial advertising as a productive contribution to the nascent propaganda industry.[45] These aspects are considered along with the rise of avant-garde art movements, particularly Vorticism in Britain. The pictorial trope as visible continuum, including Hogarth's *line of beauty* as well as other recurring motifs, is also considered in this chapter, not only in respect of the potential value of each construct but also as signifiers of genealogical legacy, thereby becoming the means by which alternative perspectives can be placed upon historical analyses.

Continuation of the ways in which women were represented in the artwork of the era and the genealogy rooted in ancient Greek and Roman considerations, is examined in Chapter 3. This includes appraisal of commercial imagery, political artwork related particularly to the First World War recruitment campaigns, and portraiture and self-portraiture created in Great Britain between 1908 and 1918. This latter genre's exploration incorporates examples from the oeuvres of Laura Knight, Helen Saunders and Carrington, and the chapter also includes analysis of the female figure—whether nude or clothed—as both subject and object. Artwork specific to the output of the suffrage and anti-suffrage movements forms the basis of Chapter 4; this line of enquiry encompasses the shift in both perception and actuality of a woman's role once the First World War commenced in August 1914. In addition, political polemics relating to female emancipation and the manifestos associated with avant-garde art movements are explored, including those relating to the Vorticists and Futurists.

Chapter 5 primarily considers sexuality and sensuality and their exploitation for political and advertising means, along with the ways this can affect a viewer's perception of a so-called ideal. Consequently the concept of vanity is investigated, predominantly in respect of prospective connotations from an observer's perceived perspective. Because aesthetic stylings can be seen—particularly in Cubist and Vorticist imagery— that seemingly defeminise a female figure, the deliberate or inadvertent