Prostitution In Art History

Since the dawn of history, physical lust has been portrayed in Western culture. Due to the conservative mood, even the boldest of artists reverted to symbols and allusions when portraying eroticism and carnal love. These sensitive themes, have undergone sublimation through historical myths, parables, and allegories, and that was the only way to present it to the viewer.

In this wide spectrum of works which describe the female nude, the portrayal of prostitutes is most outstanding. There is a certain difficulty and caution that needs to be taken when defining the role of this woman, which results from the lack of information we possess about her occupation. This woman was the model for the artist, and thus the source for the name of the work, does not always merits to be categorized as a prostitute.

In light of the ethical verification which characterized Western traditions, we can assume that the women who were used as models, were indeed prostitutes. Since this assumption is not wholly based and verified, we chose to relate to the works whose names explicitly reveal the nature of this woman, *Luxuria, Cortisan, Odalisque, Olympia, and Mary Magdalene*, etc.

Along with the liberation of the Western society, the task of identifying the role of the woman became easier. The modern artist began calling works by their respected names: *The Salon, Prostitute and Client, Streetwalker,* and more. Under such title, it was possible to include women who were not prostitutes by profession, but who were associated with prostitution since they were seductresses. Such involvement in physical pleasure was considered a moral sin as in the case of - Potiphar who seduced Joseph.

Before we proceed and discuss the works that depict prostitutes, it is necessary to review the sociological and historical outlook of this phenomenon.

There is a very good reason why prostitution is referred to as "the oldest profession in the world." Already in the early cultures, the prostitute fills a sociological-religious function of utmost importance. These primordial societies were strict about differentiating the prostitute from the rest of the community through different clothing, zoning their living quarters and restricting child-bearing[1]. On the other hand, society acknowledged her importance and allowed her explicit privileges, both religious and municipal, that from a post-feminist point of view, to be discussed in detail later on, it seems as if prostitutes had a wide array of diversified rights that married women lacked.

In the ancient Eastern cultures, prostitutes were priestesses in the temples. Sexual contact with them provided a legitimate means of dealing with stress and removal of physical disorder that stood in the way of the community's harmonious spiritual life. The temple, in return, provided shelter, nutrition and clothing to the prostitute.

Judaism, on the other hand, strongly prohibited and restricted prostitution. In Deuteronomy, Chapter 23: "No Israelite woman shall become a temple prostitute, and no man shall prostitute himself in any way. You shall not allow a common prostitute's fee, or the pay of a male's prostitute to be brought into the house of the LORD your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both of them are abominable to the LORD your God." The Bible pays much attention to this issue in order to decipher between the Hebrite monotheistic rituals and idol worshipping that includes orgies and other wild sexual conducts that take place in the temple of the Cannanites, the Hitties, and the Gebuzerts, and other nations in Mesopotamia.

In the Japanese tradition, the role of the prostitute referred to as "Geisha" is compared to a call girl. To the modern spectator, her position is distinguished in that she is the only female, in a male dominant society, who is allowed to acquire education and culture. Her qualifications were not only measured by how well she could satisfy a man sexually. The Geisha also had to satisfy his spiritual being as well. From an early age she studied poetry, theater, dance, and manners, all of which were denied to other women in the society. The situation is similar in the early Western culture in Greece.

In Ancient Greece the subject of prostitutes is more complex. Within this composite structure, we find hierarchy and sub-division in position. This intricacy has been studied through the various laws and regulations written by the democratic polis dealing with harlotry.[2] Even in the Democratic model, the prostitute was the only one granted with extensive rights, otherwise denied to females of a different status.

During the period between Medieval times until early Renaissance (3rd-16th Century), Christian art developed. Mary Magdalena is described as a prostitute who converts. She created a symbolic duality of a sinful life in the physical sense, and on the other hand, a pure soul in the spiritual sense. Although the prostitute is identified as Luxuria, mother of carnal sins, she was also thought to have an important sociological function separated between men and behaving immorally.[3]

The 17th and 18th centuries rapid industrialization resulted in an increase of the population in the major European cities, and the harlot's image became a symbol of modern society's illness, such that the Protestant reformation a and the Catholic counter-reformation reflect the ambivalence towards the prostitute.

The 19th Century's conservative Victorian thinking, along with the fear of syphilis and the July 1830 Revolution, led to the obsessive occupation with the prostitute and her role in the theater, literature, music and the fine arts. She is seen as the new "heroine," one with an immoral body, who still has a pure soul. Very often she symbolizes the proletariat exploited by the Marxist social class, where the bourgeois client buys her freedom.[4] Dostoyevsky's Sonya, Dumas' Camille, Nabokov's Lolita, Verdi's La-Traviata, and Emile Zola's Nana are all examples of this social phenomenon.

In France, for example, the harlot's social status was central and of great importance. They had connections with the political leaders, and used their powers to influence different political decisions. They visited the theater and the opera, accompanying some of the greatest politicians and intellectuals of the time. The prostitutes owned the avant-garde salons in Paris. They also influenced the fashion of the time, dictating style and setting standards for elegance. they were instrumental in paving the way for women in the field of interior design.

The prostitute as a subject in art was a dominant iconographical theme in 19th Century art. the artists were fascinated by the prostitute's lifestyle, and related to the "modernism" mood of the time. There was an interesting duality of a young heroine, sensuous and vibrant who is headed towards fast self-destruction, while in the search for a youth's naivite. Perhaps equaled to an allegory of internal and external corruption of the French nation which was on the brink of a war with the Prussians.

Back in America. the situation as similar to Europe. The mass immigration, accompanied by a demographic imbalance between males and females, led to the rise of highly sought prostitutes at the end of the 19th Century. On Broadway the harlot was portrayed as the anti-heroine in famous plays. Sherwood produced *Waterloo Bridge*, William Sroyan came up with *The Time of Your Life*, while Tennessee Williams' *Streetcar Named Desire* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* were adopted to Broadway plays.

American art has also taken an interest in the depiction of harlots, while the social critique leaned towards the Marxist view and at a later period, a feminist stand and struggle for equal opportunity for women. It is thus surprising that with all that was happening, many women refrained from prostitution in the fight for promoting women's constitutional rights.[5]

The first examples of the portrayal of prostitutes in Western art is from the seventh and sixth Century B.C. The earliest evidence recovered on the islands of Greece of pornographic eroticism is found on pottery, although the description was not based on mythological ethos or a literary allegory. We cannot determine that the women in these scenes are necessarily prostitutes. however, based on he social-historical background of the period, we e can assume that the women were indeed prostitutes.

In the Classical period men were occupied with "genophobia," and the need to prove that they did not father any children. This behavior ultimately led to an extremely conservative attitude, and a refrainment from presenting the woman to strangers.[6] Twelve-year-old girls who got married spent most of their lives in the outskirts and were forbidden to come in contact with other people in town. The names these women were given, "Gina," (childbearer) or "Damar," (the tamed), display the importance of keeping the married woman away from the eyes of a stranger. Undoubtedly, the women portrayed in these erotic scenes belonged to a different social class. The prostitutes functioned as escorts for men. They were engaged in conversations, sexual activities and entertainment. Once again, these women enjoyed the freedom that was denied to married women; they were able to walk around freely, participate in cultural events along with men.[7]

At the top of the hierarchy of the prostitutes were the Hiatairi, who provided the pleasure of the mind and body. These women were usually immigrants or mistresses, and were of the only level; that was allowed to purchase property and material goods.

Right below the Hitairi were the Falake, which is similar to a mistress. these women were prostitutes who served as lovers to only one man. The man could redeem his mistress and offer her as a priestess to the temple of Venus, the goddess of love, patron of the prostitutes.[8] The women interact with the other figures in the scene. they look at each other, exchange smiles, and touch one another.

At the bottom of the hierarchy are the Porno, prostitutes of the lowest social class, who were usually captured during a war. The pornos are described as performing sexual acts with numerous men in unnatural positions, and they were usually passive in the act.

Common Body Position of the Prostitute

The traditional pose we find of "priestesses" sculptures in the Temple of Venus is one of lying on the side, one knee is elevated, and the woman leans on one elbow and stares straight at the viewer. Venus herself is seen in this pose in the scenes describing mythological "sleepers" like Andimion, Ariadana or the maenads who sleep in the forest and are sexually attacked by the satyrs. The woman in such a pose was seen as a provocative seductress, and continued to illiterate description of sensuous women such as Titian's *Venus from Urbino*, 1583, and Goya's *Maja*, 1805. In other words, the artist related between the woman's pose and the type of woman described, such as Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, Renoir's *Odalisque*, 1872, or Manet's *Olympia*, (Picture2*)*.

Empathic Humanization versus De-Humanization of the Prostitute

Another format of portraying the female prostitute is emphasizing her weary soul, her melancholy, and her unfortunate destiny through body and facial expression. In such cases, the body is drooping and bent, expressing tiredness and hopelessness. In 1840 Carpaccio's *Two Venetian Ladies on a Balcony* (Picture 5) the women are rendered with a drooping back and their faces express distance and despondency. Rodin's 1874 *The Old Cortisan who was Once the Beautiful Wife of the Helmet Maker* shows an old woman cortisan. Her body is decrepit and her face expresses sadness.

The title chosen by the artist tells the story of her life. In van Gogh's drawing *Sorrow* [1884] the artist describes Christina, a young prostitute, whom he took into his home. In one of the letters to his brother Theo he explains how he tried to convey in one single contour the essence of the pain and struggle the girl had to endure in order to survive. To further emphasize his observation, he added small delicate flowers striving to bud under rough conditions.[9] Toulouse-Lautrec paints a picture of the prostitutes while they are on break. They stoop, have a remote expression, and massage their tired feet,[10] as in *Venus from Montmartre* [1184], *Salon Bruit de Moulin* [1894] or *Female Nudity in Front of the Mirror* [1897].

Animalistic portrayal of the prostitute is another example of how the artist de-humanizes his subject. The artist criticizes society's morbidity and phobias of sexually transmitted diseased carried by prostitutes. Picasso depicts the prostitute as a black prey bird, pecking on the head of a bourgeois client, and so transmitting all sorts of diseases and death (Pictures 3, 4). The line that creates the shadow of the crow is similar to the prostitute's hair. It is hard to determine, though, whether Picasso chose to produce this illusion, or whether it stemmed from his subconscious.

the German artist Kirschner painted the harlots covered with fancy feathers, parading in groups down the streets of Berlin, like a flock of birds. The prostitutes in Georges Roualt's paintings resemble heavy bears or gorillas. The shoulders are bent and their hands are by their sides, similar to the animals mentioned. Their teeth are protruding, a reference to the fangs of a pry animal, as in *The Prostitute* [1906]. Edgar Degas' black and white drawings from 1840 describe large groups of naked prostitutes, heaped next to each other, lacking refinement like a flock of cows, or as the artist describes it like "horses in a barn."[11] Toulouse-Lautrec was usually more empathic in his description of harlots, with the exemption of *A British Man in the Moulin Rouge* (Picture 7). In this work the artist painted a scene between two prostitutes and a potential client. The faces of the prostitutes in the center resemble that of a wild animal. her eyes are like w wild cat, her stare is cruel and penetrating, and she looks all ready to attack. It was only natural that this painting was defined by one of its critics as "wolves disguised as sheeps."[12]

Exposure of the Private Parts in the Description of Prostitutes

The Western aesthetic outlook regarding the female nude praetors full body nudity such as Venus de Milo or a woman scantily dressed with only her breasts showing, as in the case of Artemis and the Amazon women. A nude that exposes only her lower body part is seen as brusque in expressing her sexuality, and typical of the description of prostitutes who lift their dresses and expose only their lower body part in a provocative manner.

In the 19th Century Toulouse-Lautrec presented a series of works showing prostitutes waiting in line to receive shots against syphilis (Picture 8). The women are wearing a robe and expose their rears by lifting the fringes of their dresses. At the same time, the can-can girls dancing in the salons in Paris developed variations to the dances in which the girls raised their skirts and exposed their crotches. These variations were considered racy and received criticism regarding its moral implications. this reaction towards women who seduce men to the forbidden pleasures of the body has been voices throughout history.

In Genesis, Chapter 38, Tamar, Er's wife seduced Judah, her father-in-law when she was waiting for him on the side of the road dressed from head to toe and her face covered with a veil. Judah did not suspect her nor did he recognize her as his daughter-in-law, because she only exposed her lower body part: "She took off her widow's weeds, veiled her face... and sat where the road forks in two directions on the way to Timmath... when Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, and she conceived. She then rose and went home, took off her veil..."

A major literary piece from the Sumerian period is the Epic of Gilgammesh. One of the scenes, found on a cylinder seal (Picture 9) is the goddess Ishtar dressed as a prostitute, trying to seduce the mythological hero Enkidu, by raising her dress and exposing her genitals to him: "The prostitute exposed her private part and spread her legs and he came to her desire...She behaved with him as a beast, and in the womanly slyness he found echo in her heart, six days and seven nights Enkidu battled to make love to the prostitute."[13]

In Greek mythology sexual behavior was described in a manner similar to that of Venus who fell in love with the beautiful Adonis. Obidios wrote: "The fringes of her dress she will remove down to her knees, as in the manner of Diane." During the Medieval period, prostitutes were frightened by death and the devil as a way to teach them moral virtues. The scene mentioned was illustrated with their lower part exposed. A wood carving by Deutch from the 15th Century represents a female sinner wearing a dress, and the angel of death, who looks like a skeleton, lifts her dress and penetrates her with his finger.

Pearls and the Forbidden Love

An attribute that accompanies female prostitutes or seductresses is a piece of jewelry made of pearls. There is a duality that contrasts in the meaning of the pearls in society. On the one hand, pearls were worn by the aristocrats.[14] It represented purity, virginity and naturalness. On the other hand, the pearl is associated with forbidden sexual acts such as pearl fishing journeys painted by Renaissance artists

Allori and Jacopo Zucchi.[15] A possible interpretation for such a relation between prostitution and the pearl is Venus' creation. Venus, the goddess of love, was born out of the wave's foam and was carried t the seashore in a shell, the pearl's womb. This scene was vividly painted by Botticelli.

Throughout the Medieval times and the Renaissance, drawings and relieves have been made picturing prostitutes wearing pearl necklaces, working in brothels. Some RI ˜ $ O EUHFKW ' ˜˜ UHU¶V ˜ ZRRG ˜ FDUYLQJV ˜ H[pearls. Tintoretto painted the scene where Potiphar's wife is naked, wearing pearls and seducing Joseph [1555]. The theme of Susan and the elders has also been studied by the Italian artist [1557]. In this scene, pearls were scattered around Susan's feet. Pearls are very important in creating the atmosphere for the following works: Carpaccio's Venetian Ladies, Batsheva seducing David in Ruben's 1654 work, ms. Amorphi by Boucher [1732], and Courbet's 1866 lesbian women in *Sleep*.

In *Paris Trial* [1870] Ronaldson Bouriachia replaces the heroic theme with a mischievous atmosphere where Paris becomes an old bourgeois adulteress, Hermes is a pimp, and the goddesses Venus, Athena and Diana are prostitutes wearing pearl necklaces and marketing themselves. Pearls appear to have a sexual connotation in the sacrifice scenes in the Sumerian epics, where a figure is described holding a pearl necklace [1200 B.C.] .

Hair as an Attribute of the Female Prostitute

Another characteristic we see in the portrayal of prostitutes is an emphasis and sometimes an exaggeration in the hair flowing down the naked body. Hair is seen as the "other sexual body part" of the woman whose exposure is used to seduce men in most religions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, different cultures of the East and Greek paganism.

In the Greek polis, women were prohibited from growing long hair because of a lice epidemic which struck the city. Only the prostitutes received a special permission to groom their hair and grow it since it was considered a "working toll." During Medieval days the description of Luxuria, the seductress, were prevalent, as a naked woman with her hair freely falling down to her feet. Sometimes, the angel of death, illustrated as a skeleton, holds her hair. Other times maggots or snakes dissect her rotten sinful body, as in Green's *Death and the Maiden* [1571]. During the Renaissance, the "foolish woman" theme was common, as a fable to the vanities. The naked woman with wild long hair, holding a mirror, which represents vanity and an hour-glass in the other had foreshadows the punishments of the sinner on Judgment Day.

One of the most documented prostitutes in fine art is Mary Magdalene. As described in Luke, Chapter 7:36-50: "...he went to the Pharisee's house and took his place at table. A woman who was living an immoral life in the town had learned that Jesus was at table in the Pharisee's house and had brought oil in myrrh in a small flask. She took her place behind him, by his feet, weeping. His feet were wetted with her tears and she wiped them with her hair, kissing them and anointing them with the myrrh. When his host the Pharisee saw this he said to himself 'If this fellow were a real prophet, he would know who this woman is that touches him, and what sort of a woman she is, a sinner.'...And so, I tell you, her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven." Magdalene became the symbol of regret and conversion. She is also painted with long wild hair, sometimes as Abishag, King David's mistress. This description of Magdalene usually appears in the scene when Christ is taken off the cross. She stands on the right side of Jesus together with the Virgin Mary, as seen in the Philding Sanctuary [1400] in Hanover, or in the Ne Me Tange scene where Jesus asks her not to touch him before he is resurrected. Sometimes she is portrayed as a hermit, isolating herself from the work as in Donatello's Magdalene (Picture 10), *Mary of Egypt* (end of the 15th century) from San German in Paris, Manet's *Mary Magdalene* [1644] or George de la Tour Magdalena [1750].

The Prostitute and the Client

Many artists chose to examine the theme of the prostitute with her client. In a mosaic in Santa Maria Maggiore [5th Century] we see a scene where Rehav, the prostitute from Jericho, is helping spies escape from her house through the window. Anonymous works from the Renaissance have been found dealing with prostitutes and their clients in a brother titled *The Corrupted Life* [15th Century Barselo Library]. In two wood carvings by Dürer, *The Bad Money* (Picture 11) and *Carnal Love* [1480] we see a dressed client touching the naked prostitute, while her hand reaches for his sack of money.

Toulouse-Lautrec often painted the bourgeois man on a quest for prey, observing the "merchandise." He is usually dressed in a tailored suit and a top hat as a symbol of his social status. In Manet's *Olympia* (Picture 2) the client is not visible, but his presence is strongly felt as the harlot is looking in his direction when the Negro servant hands her a bouquet of flowers. The element of flower giving is a common custom between the prostitute and the client.

In *Self Portrait with a Hat* [1909] Picasso paints himself as a rich bourgeois who stands in the center of some licentious prostitutes. The theme of the other bourgeois client with the prostitute appears in other works such as the *Bourgeois Solicitation* (Picture 3).

Ludwig Kirschner describes a man approaching prostitutes in *Posdam Center* [1914]. In this scene a sociological phenomenon is explored where the harlots in Berlin would dress up as widows who have lost their husbands in World War I and go out to the center of town to lure customers.

The American artist John Sloan socially criticizes the exploitation of women in a drawing that appeared in the New York paper "The Masses." In the drawing *Night Court for Women - the Prostitute in Front of the Creator and the Judge* (Picture 12),a woman is tried for soliciting women to prostitution. The judge, the prosecutor, the defense council, the clerks, the witnesses, and all the other present in the courtroom are all men. The message is very clear; It is those that have led her to such crimes, and who enjoy her services that are the ones to try her now. Other American artists have become more conscious of the moral disintegration of women who are in financial problems, such as Robert Mayner's *Moral Business* [1920] and Sam Mazette's *First Step in the Disintegration of a Young Girl* [1900].

In *Women Bathing on Jaffe's Beach* {1926] Nahum Gutman describes the prostitutes and the clients in the act of love making through a window of a brothel in Jaffe. This scene was also published in "Jonah in Nineveh" [1929], a book Gutman illustrated. In the book, the prophet preaches to the sinners as the clients and the prostitutes stand naked outside the window and listen. In *A Neighbors Quarrel*

[1934] two prostitutes argue through the window while the Arab pimp invites the gay sailor to come in. In an ink drawing series that were shown in the exhibition "Secret in the Orchid" (Picture 13) [1991] Reuven House, Tel Aviv] a prostitute holds out her hand to a client who is counting his money (Picture 14). there is also a portrait of a woman, who is illustrated very distinctly, while the illustration of the client is blurry, thus he is seen as anonymous and unimportant. The prostitute is described as a woman who is physically there, but her thoughts are far away.

In another work in which Gutman describes a brother (Picture 19) through which windows one can see the prostitute and the client engaged in the act of sex, while in the garden a prostitute is swimming in the pool and an aroused man looks at her through the bushes. On the other side of the garden a couple is having sex. Here again, her face is distinctly painted, while he still remains anonymous. Above in the sky, half the moon with a star inside it shines, as a reference to the Eastern eroticism that occupied many Western artists.

In conclusion, in the history of the art the description of females as prostitutes has occupied a great many artist. As mentioned, we cannot avoid the difficulty in the methodology used to portray them. Therefore, a delicate iconographical observation through the prevalence of these characters described with the same repetitious attributes. In similar compositions, in ritual settings, and finally in body positions and facial expressions. We can also identify the prostitutes by repetitions figures that always accompany her such as the client, the peepers, or different personifications of death, the devil, and melancholy. In ancient days there was also an iconographical and iconological importance to the physical disposition of the prostitute as found in scenes of the prostitute as a priestess, in a sculpture form and seals. We should also study the figures' appearance from codex and other ancient texts. Out of respect for other naked women who are not prostitutes, we should not accept one attribute we used to identify the prostitute, but instead, we should aim to find a correlation.

1. *Lying Hitari,* 6th Cebtury B.C., Sestic, Berlin
2. Edouard Manet - *Olympia*, 1863, Paris
3. Picasso - *The Bourgeois Solicitation*, 1903, Weidel Collection, Barecelona
4. Picasso - *Crow Bickering at the Head of a Citizen*, 1903, Weidel Collection, Barcelona
5. Carpaccio - *Two Venetian Ladies on a Balcony,* 1840, Venice
6. Rodin- *She Who was Once the Hemaet Maker's Beautiful Wife*, 1874, Rodin, Paris
7. Toulouse-Lautrec - *A British Man in the Moulin Rouge,* 1892, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
8. Toulouse-Lautrec - *Two Women Waiting for Their Shots*, 1894, Louvre, Paris
9. *Ishatar* (cylinder seal), 2000B.C., Bagdhad
10. Donatello's - *Magdalene* , 1454, Pasterium, Florence
11. Albrecht Dürer - *The Bad Money,* 1480, Albertina, Vienna
12. Sloan - *Female's Night Court - The Prostitute in Front of her Creator and Judges*- 1913, New York
13. Nahum Gutman - *Untitled,* 1926-30, Family Collection
14. Nahum Gutman - *Untitled,* 1926-30, Family Collection
15. Nahum Gutman - *Untitled,* 1926-30, Family Collection

. B. Anderson & J. Zinsser, A History of Their Own, Vol. 1 (New York, 1988), pp.22, 46[1]

[2] Ibid, p.45
[3] S. Shahar, The Woman in the Medieval Society, (Tel Aviv, 1983), p. 185.
[4] K. Stoner Lynn, From the House to the Streets, (London, 1991), pp. 130-144.
[5] M. Gene, A Male Guide to Women Libertaion, (New York, 1977), p. 190.

[6] Ibid, A History of Their Own, p. 41.
[7] C. Johns, Sex or Symbol-Erotic Images of Greece and Rome, (London, 1982), p. 120.
[8] Ibid, p. 41.
[9] J. Hulsker, The Complete Van Gogh, (Oxford, 1980), pp. 38-40.
[10] A. Mathias, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec- The Theater of Life, (West Germany, 1987), pp. 70-71, 74.
[11] D. Pfiffer, The Art of the Painting and Sculptures, Vol. I, Jerusalem, 1983, pp. 104-105.
[12] Ibid, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, p. 49.
[13]

[14] J. Evans, A History of jewellery 1100-1870, (New York, 1989), pp. 49-60.
[15] F. Antal, "The Problem of Mannerism in the Netherlands," Classicism and Romanticism, (London, 1966), p. 79.