



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Photo By Hugo Schneider

My Body is My Own

—Women's exploration of autonomy of themselves



Curators:

Melissa

Vivienne

Freya

Mia

Matthew

**This exhibition includes themes and
content some audiences may find distressing**

Discretion is Advised

All images in this exhibition are from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) and that you are using them in accordance with the licence conditions stating that these are Public Domain (CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication, legal information available here: <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en>)

The photograph of the Met on the first page of our exhibition is not from the Met Collection but from a photographer under ShareAlike 2.0.

**Photograph by Hugo Schneider
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Hugo Schneider do not in any way endorse this exhibition.

Introduction

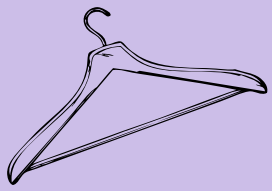
Do women really have autonomy over themselves in their hands ?

Let's think this over:

- Can women choose what they want to wear?
 - Can women choose their lovers?
- Can women choose to give birth to a new life?
 - Can women choose to give up a life?
 - Can women protect themselves?
- Can women escape the judgmental gaze of others?

There has been a social context of patriarchal systems throughout the world throughout history, and the effects of such systems have spilled over into the 21st century. For women in particular, they do not enjoy the same power as men. But with practice, women began to find themselves out of feudal oppression. Therefore, this exhibition will elaborate women's efforts on their autonomy from five perspectives: Clothing Freedom、 Pregnancy and Childbirth、 Protection、 The Female Gaze and The awakening of female sexuality.

In this exhibition, even though some objects show the constraints of society on women's autonomy still exist, we encourage and appeal to everyone learning from the past and inspiring women today to think about how they can better defend their bodily autonomy.



Clothing Freedom

Do women really have the freedom to dress whatever they want at all times?

In 1800, France established a law that women were not allowed to wear pantsuits. Any woman who wanted to wear pantsuits had to get permission from the police first. In the western culture at this time, pantsuits were reserved for men and women could only wear skirts. This law was a product of patriarchy, where women's dress was based on male standards.

In the 2015 BBC documentary "India's Daughters," an Indian man said: "Men and women are not equal. Girls should do housework instead of wearing clothes that should not be worn. " Is it really right to restrain women's clothing to prevent men's willpower from being too weak?



Crinoline lady

1755-57

Nymphenburg Porcelain Manufactory

Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue



Ensemble

ca.1855

American or European

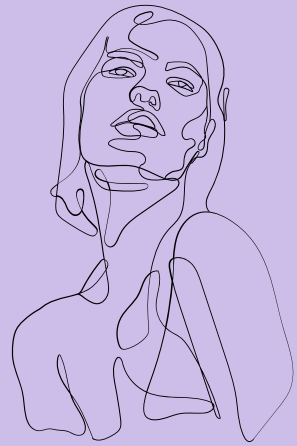
Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue

From the Renaissance to the 21st century, the female body has become a marker that defines the relationship between men and women and their social status. Women do not have the right to choose what to wear, and they are forced to label themselves as "the way women should dress". Women are no longer free individuals, but vague outlines under a stereotypical label.

Examining European corsets and ancient Chinese women's shoes in the Met reveals that women have been "works of art" under a male aesthetic. Women's pursuit of clothing freedom is not only the right to choose clothes freely but also the pursuit of equality between men and women.





Corset

early 18th century

Spanish

silk

Gift of Mr. Claggett Wilson, 1946

This corset is from the Rococo era. In this era, men believe that the ideal beauty of women is a thin waist. A woman with a thin waist is a symbol of perfection. So, women use corsets to gird their waists.

However, with "standard beauty" comes some harm to the body. Corsets cause fainting, restrict women's lung activity, and important organs can not be fully expanded, resulting in painful breathing. In the long run, complications such as headaches, habitual abortion and so on.



Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue



Shoes

In ancient Chinese aesthetics, the ideal beauty of a woman was her softness. To men, small feet were a symbol of female beauty. Foot binding is breaking and tightly binding the feet of young girls to change their shape and size.

The shoe shown here was worn by a woman with wrapped feet, and its length was only 12.7 cm. The foot binding has caused huge damage to the woman's body, with her four little toes being crushed off, and her heels unable to touch the ground. The women lost the ability to walk normally and were confined to their homes.



1800-1943

China

silk, cotton

5*21/8 in.*5 in.(12.7*5.4*12.7 cm)

Gift of Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, 1943

Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue

Pregnancy and Childbirth

The birth of a child is a natural part of life for everyone. During pregnancy a woman is no longer alone in her own body as she becomes a place of growth for new life. In some cases, a woman may be subjected to religious values that place restrictions on what she can or cannot do with the foetus. Unwanted opinions are expressed from her close inner circle. Hormones may increase anxiety, fear, and sadness compounding in what is commonly known as postpartum depression. There can be issues with self-image which can lead to her feeling undesirable to herself or her partner. Exhaustion can last from the beginning of the pregnancy to long after the birth.



Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalog

The Visit to the Nursery

1661

Gabriël Metsu



A woman may have a stressful and frustrating time getting pregnant, suffering from infertility or difficulty conceiving. Miscarriage and the hope for a “Rainbow Baby” (a baby conceived after loss of a pregnancy) can become all-consuming on a woman wishing for a child. A woman’s age can become a heavy burden to bear. Teenage pregnancy, babies conceived during a sexual assault, whether to keep the baby, adoption, or abortion. There is nothing simple about pregnancy and childbirth.

The Holy Family

ca. 1512–13

Joos van Cleve



Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogu

**Limestone statuette
of a childbirth scene
ca. 310–30 B.C.
Cypriot**

The statue shows what happens after the labor and pain of childbirth. There is a woman carved into a laying back position with a newborn baby still resting between her legs. Childbirth is exhausting and can make women feel overjoyed, and overwhelmed.



Background has been removed from original image on the Met website and frame added

Public Domain
@ The Met Online Catalogue

On view at The Met Fifth Avenue in Gallery 171

Diana Discovering Callisto's Pregnancy 1566

**Cornelis Cort Netherlandish
After Titian (Tiziano Vecellio) Italian**

This is an engraved print based on the Roman mythological story of the pregnancy of the nymph Callisto caused by Zeus in disguise. This pregnancy causes Diana anger as Callisto was to remain a virgin, devoted to serving Diana. Diana transforms Callisto into a bear and sends her into the sky as punishment for the perceived betrayal which is how the legend of the constellation Ursa Major came to be.



Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue





The awakening of female sexuality

In late nineteenth-century America, 'sex' was still a topic that could not be discussed in public. It was considered by many to be indecent and repulsive, not to mention the subject of artwork. The image of women in the eyes of the world was supposed to be as pure, noble and even conservative as an angel. Once women were associated with sexuality, they immediately became obscene and dirty, and were seen as sluts. The term "slut shaming" was also coined, referring to the fact that women should be ashamed of having sex and sexual desire. Such irrational and traditional gender expectations prevented women from forming an autonomous view of their own gender, and even caused physical harm by suppressing sexuality for long periods of time.

In the mid-twentieth century, men initiated a culture of sexual freedom that was anti-orthodox but macho in nature. This sexual freedom centered on the satisfaction of male sexual desire and saw women as instruments who could enter into sexual relationships and have sex at will. As a result, most women do not experience liberation and with it comes another kind of oppression. Women still do not have the power to choose. The perception of sexuality is still vague and unsettling. Therefore, I would like to explore how women should deal with the controversial topic of sexuality in relation to the two works *Female nude reclining* and *Heart On*.



**Female nude reclining
1909–1910
Auguste Rodin
Gift of Thomas F. Ryan, 1913**

This sketch depicts a woman ecstatic by her body's pleasure. The stretched body and raised head are highly expressive, and she is comfortable and enjoying herself in the face of sex. This expression of sexual freedom is in complete contrast to the stereotypical rules and regulations imposed on women by traditional society. This leads to the question: how should women deal with sexuality?

Rodin's fluid lines and light strokes depict the female body with a casual, natural beauty, a gesture of unconsciousness brought on by desire. At the same time, his frank treatment of sexual themes is a key feature of the modernity of his sketches.

Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue

Protection

From physical harm and sexual assault to emotional abuse and gaslighting, society has always been a dangerous place to be a woman. In the UK, 1.6 million women are victims of domestic abuse every year. Protecting yourself is an everyday reality for women the world over.

In this section, the theme of female protection in art is examined and contrasted. Protection may be physical or emotional, aggressive or vulnerable, solitary or shared, masculine or feminine. We ask: what do the ways that we protect ourselves say about us?



La Pucelle d'Orléans
Gilles Rousselet and Abraham Bosse after
Claude Vignon
1647

France, Engraving

Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue



Judith Slaying Holofernes

Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert after Maarten van Heemskerck

1551

Netherlands
Engraving

This engraving is part of a wider series of engravings entitled 'The Power of Women'. Coornhert displays an extremely aggressive and direct form of protection in this engraving as Judith fights violence with violence. The theme of powerful women is emphasised by the visible muscles on Judith's body as she forces Holofernes' head down towards the floor. Judith also wears a headpiece whilst Holofernes' helmet is on the floor, further demonstrating her power over a male aggressor.

Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue

Two Women Embracing

Egon Schiele

1913

Austria

Drawing (gouache, watercolours and graphite on paper)

The form of the two bodies practically becomes one, showing strength that is found through shared vulnerability and kinship. The women wrap their arms around one another and bring themselves close. The women are comfortable in their nudity and appear calm, with one woman's hand resting on her lap. Schiele's depiction of protection is not physical, but emotional. It is found in the togetherness and kinship that the women share.

Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue



The Female Gaze

In 1989, The Guerrilla Girls questioned “Do women need to be naked to get into the Met?” The group’s protest art confronted how few female artists feature in the Met’s collection in comparison to the female nudes created by men.

Examining the collaborative work of Pierre-Louis Pierson and Countess Virginia Oldoini Verasis di Castiglione, we see a woman acting as creative director and using the male photographer as ‘a mere tool’.

Can women still have control over their bodies when represented by male artists? By looking at these works through The Female Gaze, do the photographs fight misogynistic views of women in control and should The Countess be formally credited for her creativity?



Scherzo di Follia
Pierre-Louis Pierson
1863–66, printed 1940s

Public Domain
@ The Met Online Catalogue



Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue

The Gaze

Pierre-Louis Pierson

1856-1857



Albumen silver print from glass negative

The original interpretation for this image uses language such as ‘ornament’ and ‘priced peach’ to describe The Countess. Men have believed that the photograph was made for them to gaze upon. Any control The Countess might have had has been dismissed as “raging narcissism”.

Re-examining the photograph in 2022, the power can be restored to The Countess as audiences recognise her directness is not seductive but The Female Gaze.

La Frayeur

**Pierre-Louis Pierson & Countess Virginia Oldoini Verasis di
Castiglione
1861-1867**

Salted paper print from glass negative with applied colour

This photograph by Pierson features a layer of paint on top of the original image. The paint element of the work was completed by The Countess, further presenting her involvement with the shoot process and her control over her image. Her interference with the photograph adapts it from a work of photography, to being viewed as a piece of Fine Art.

Despite this, male collectors and curators have previously granted no formal credit to The Countess. For this exhibition, The Countess has been acknowledged as a creative collaborator of this work.



Public Domain

@ The Met Online Catalogue

Glossary

Abortion: Also called voluntary abortion. the removal of an embryo or fetus from the uterus in order to end a pregnancy.

Complication: a new illness that makes treatment of a previous one more complicated or difficult.

The Female Gaze: A feminist theory referring to the female spectator, artist, director in a piece of creative work. Represents women as more than a sexual object and their actions do not revolve around men.

Gaslighting: the act of manipulating someone to make them question their own reality or perception of events

Gird: to surround something with something or to fasten something around somebody/something.

The Male Gaze: Viewing media through a typically heterosexual male lens. Women are shown as sexualised and objectified for the pleasure of a male viewer.

Miscarriage: The expulsion of a fetus before it is viable, especially between the third and seventh months of pregnancy; spontaneous abortion.

Misogyny: A prejudice against women.

Patriarchy: a social system in which positions of dominance and privilege are primarily held by men.

Post-Partum Depression: Depression suffered by a mother following childbirth, typically arising from the combination of hormonal changes, psychological adjustment to motherhood, and fatigue, postnatal depression.

Rainbow Baby: A baby born after miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, molar pregnancy, termination for medical reasons, stillbirth, or neonatal death.

Renaissance: a period marking the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern times in European history, characterized by efforts to revive and surpass the ideas and achievements of classical era.

Rococo era: Rococo art was formed in France at the beginning of the 18th century, with exquisite, sweet and elegant as its main artistic features.

Willpower: Self-control, training and control of oneself and one's conduct.

Wrap: to put something firmly around something/somebody.





Thank You



All the artwork has been taken from the open access collection from the
Metropolitan Museum of Art