

THE MUSES — THEIR DEMISE AND RESURRECTION

Background Notes

Ruth Millington — 6 September 2023

Traditional narratives about the artist's muse have been written by, and to benefit, men. They present the trope of a submissive, female model at the mercy of, and often in a romantic relationship with, a great male artist. Such images of the muse have flooded popular culture and fiction, and fictional is exactly what they are. This seminar seeks to debunk such myths and instead focus on the contributions and agency of the artist's muse by exploring two key case studies: Dora Maar and Emilie Louise Flöge.



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, c.1665

Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c.1665) is one of the most famous paintings in the world, and also one of the most mysterious. Who is this girl, dressed in an unusual blue-and-gold headscarf, with her iconic pearl earring?

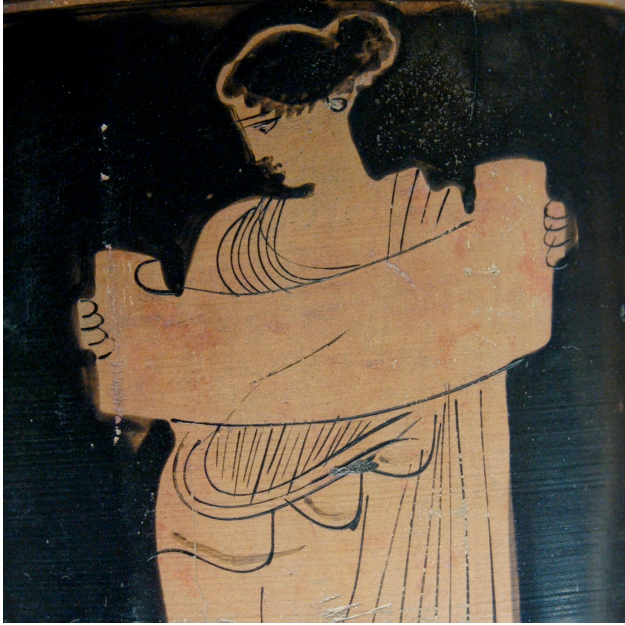
The much-debated identity of Vermeer's model inspired Tracy Chevalier to write *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which tells a fictitious story behind the painting. Set in seventeenth-century Holland, it follows the narrative of Griet, a sixteen-year-old Dutch girl who becomes a maid in the house of the successful painter. From his studio, the artist paints solitary women in domestic settings, illuminated by brilliant sunlight.

It's not long before Griet becomes his next subject: she sits for the notorious painting, wearing his wealthy wife's pearl earring, with her hair tied up in the striking headscarf. Griet has become the artist's muse, the source of his creative inspiration.

This stereotypical artist–muse relationship portrayed in Chevalier's story is one that is embedded in our consciousness: Griet plays the role of a young, attractive, female muse, existing at the mercy of an influential, older male artist. While she shares Vermeer's artistic sensibility, as his maid, Griet must surrender to his control. Nowhere is this made clearer than in the moment Vermeer pierces her earlobe so that Griet can wear the pearl earring; she endures pain for the sake of the portrait.

Chevalier also submits Griet to the trope of the romantic muse, lacing her narrative with sexual tension and emphasising physical touch between the pair: 'I could not think of anything but his fingers on my neck, his thumb on my lips.' She inspires this man in ways that his wife cannot, and an intimacy develops between the maid and Vermeer that ultimately gives power to his painting.

But is this perception of a muse – as powerless, submissive and female – accurate? Or could this characterisation actually be somewhat lazy and untrue? Have muses had more agency than we give them credit for? To find out, we must go back to Ancient Greece to understand the original identity, purpose and status of the muse.



Muse reading a scroll. Attic red-figure lekythos, c.435-425 BC

In Greek mythology, there were nine female muses. They were the children of Zeus, King of the Gods, and Mnemosyne, Titaness of memory and artistic inspiration. Born at the foot of Mount Olympus, the muses were gifted goddesses of the arts: music, dance, song, poetry and memory. Ancient Greek vase painting depicts them as animated young women, playing musical instruments, singing and reading from scrolls. Invoked by mortals, the muses inspired musicians, artists and writers, all of whom depended on them for divine creativity, wisdom and insight.

The Greek writer Hesiod claimed in his poem *Theogony* to have spoken with the muses, who turned him from a simple shepherd into a blessed poet: 'The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing / Sweet Songs'.

At their ancient origin, the muses were far from passive subjects for an artist to paint or write about. Instead, they were agents of divine inspiration. The artist–muse relationship was one that was revered, and poets, at their mercy, paid homage to these divinities.



Jean-Marc Nattier, *Thalia, Muse of Comedy*, 1739

During the Italian Renaissance, the likes of Titian, Tintoretto and Mantegna drew on ancient Greek culture to paint allegorical masterpieces in which muses came to symbolise the rebirth of the arts. They appear frequently as joyful young women, dancing and playing music in mythical forests, providing inspiration to those around them.

However, there was also a significant shift in the portrayal of muses during the Renaissance: frequently, their drapes and dresses have fallen away to reveal bare bodies, painted in soft, fleshy tones. These nubile nudes appear as seductive mistresses, feeding the fantasy of men, both in and outside of the picture frame. We find that muses have become icons of idealised and sexualised beauty.

As early as the thirteenth century, the arts saw another major change in the relationship between the creator and the muse: visual artists and writers were increasingly influenced by real-life, rather than mythological, subjects. Dante Alighieri famously wrote about Beatrice Portinari as 'the love of his life and inspiration muse'. By the Victorian era, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were painting models who were friends, fellow artists, wives, sisters and lovers. Artists had become enamoured with, and creatively dependent upon, the muses they knew personally.



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-2

Given their interest in myth and legend, many Pre-Raphaelite painters presented their models as doomed damsels. Most notably, John Everett Millais portrayed twenty-three-year-old Elizabeth Siddall as Shakespeare's tragic heroine, drowning in a river, in *Ophelia* (1851–52). Through this definitive painting, not only did Siddall become the face of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, but she has since been held up as a symbol of the mistreated female muse, repeatedly cast as a victim – much like the fictional figure she had posed as – in biographies, plays, novels and period dramas. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many male artists not only embraced, but also perpetuated, this myth of the romantic, feminine muse, focusing on her as an object of desire. With his bronze sculpture, *The Sculptor and his Muse* (1895), Auguste Rodin presented the muse as a nude, long-haired woman who whispers seductively into the ear of the male creator to provide him with inspiration. Meanwhile, with his modernist oval-headed sculptures such as *The Sleeping Muse* (1910), Constantin Brâncuși imagined the muse in idealised feminine terms, often with her eyes closed, as a peaceful dreaming beauty.



Pablo Picasso, *The Weeping Woman*, 1937

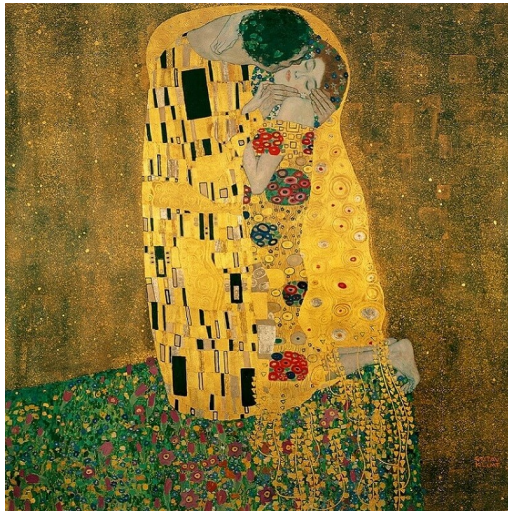
Meanwhile, Pablo Picasso brought dramatic tension to the surface of his canvases, on which he portrayed the many women who shaped his life and career: Fernande Olivier, Eva Gouel, Olga Khokhlova, Marie-Thérèse Walter, Jacqueline Roque, Françoise Gilot and, most famously, his weeping woman, Dora Maar. ‘To my misfortune, and maybe my delight, I place things according to my love affairs,’ he declared. While he acknowledged the presence of many muses within his work, Picasso also attempted to deny these women any agency: ‘Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.’

Thus, the stereotype of the muse – as a passive, young and attractive female serving man’s creative genius – was firmly established. To possess a muse had become a status symbol for the ‘great’ male artist, and patriarchal art historical accounts have since bought into, and preserved, this idea.

Therefore, with the arrival of feminism came a much-needed critique of the muse. While preceded by a long history of activism, it was during the so-called ‘second wave’ of the 1960s and 70s, that the feminist art movement

drew particular attention to systemic sexism, inequality and discrimination ingrained in the arts, as well as wider society. Critics raised concerns about women being objectified and exploited by philandering playboy artists like Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who once notoriously claimed, 'I paint with my prick.'

By the 1980s, art historians such as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock were refuting tropes of the idealised, silent muse perpetuated by masculinist discourses. 'Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?' demanded the anonymous art activists, Guerrilla Girls, in 1989. More recently, narratives have invited us to see artists' models, especially women, as 'more than a mere muse'. When the portraitist Jonathan Yeo, who had been painting model Cara Delevingne, called her his 'perfect subject and muse' in 2016, he was met with much contempt. 'It's time to lock this silly term away in the attic,' wrote the *Guardian*'s art critic Jonathan Jones.



Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss*, 1907-1908

However, perhaps it is our misconception of the muse – a term which has come to carry patronising, sexist and pejorative connotations – which needs locking away. If we delve *inside* the relationships that real-life muses have held with artists, might we find that they have been far from subordinate and

romantic subjects? How did fashion designer Emilie Flöge influence Gustav Klimt's trademark style? Or how did Dora Maar transform Picasso's politics, subject matter and style? Why have so many great women artists been muses?

Over time, the concept of a muse has changed considerably. Since its divine origins in Greek mythology, the term has acquired connotations of powerlessness. Today, therefore, it's often met with much criticism and even mockery. But could it be our view of the artist's muse as a passive model that is the real myth?

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