

Addison Cucchiaro is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Art History with a minor in Italian Studies at the University of Memphis. She is on track to graduate in May 2025 and will be attending the graduate program in Art History at American University in Washington, D.C. this fall. Addison's long-term goal is to earn a PhD in Art History, with a focus on the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods. Addison's decision to submit her work to *QuaesitUM* was motivated by a desire to share her academic findings with a wider audience. Her research, particularly in the fields of gender and queer studies in art history, highlights the intersections of art and identity, exploring the ways in which gender and sexuality have been represented in art history. Her research aims to bring forward these underrepresented perspectives and challenge traditional narratives.

Addison Cucchiaro

The Sleeping Beauty: *Venus and Cupid* by Artemisia
Gentileschi and the Spectacle of a Goddess at Rest

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Abstract

This research explores the transformation of the depiction of feminine divinity in Western art, focusing on the shift from powerful mythological goddesses to passive, objectified female figures under the male gaze during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Through the analysis of works by male artists, the research examines how the motif of the sleeping goddess reflects the growing influence of patriarchy in early modern Europe. The analysis then shifts to Artemisia Gentileschi's *Venus and Cupid*, which challenges these conventional representations by presenting Venus as a serene, empowered figure, free from the constraints of male spectatorship. Comparing Gentileschi's work to that of her male counterparts highlights the differences in how male and female artists presented their subjects, down to the smallest details. Gentileschi's interpretation of a sleeping Venus reclaims the image of the divine feminine, providing a more empowering understanding of women and their roles in both art and spirituality. Through a feminist lens, this research argues that Gentileschi's work offers a critical reimagining of feminine power, presenting a divine femininity that is not bound by objectification or the male gaze.

Introduction

The depiction of feminine divinity has undergone profound transformations throughout history, reflecting broader cultural and societal shifts. From ancient statues of pagan goddesses to the idealized nudes of early modern European art, the portrayal of women in divine or mythological contexts reveals the growing influence of the patriarchy in art. While figures like Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, have embodied fluctuating symbolism across time and space—sometimes representing feminine power and fertility, at other times serving as an object for male pleasure—male artists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods often emphasized the latter. Their depictions reinforced Venus's perceived passivity, stripping her of agency and rendering her a vulnerable, voyeuristic spectacle, governed by male-dominated artistic ideals. However, Artemisia Gentileschi's *Venus and Cupid* (**Figure 1**) challenges this narrative, reclaiming the image of Venus as a figure of serenity, empowerment, and maternal connection, free from the constraints of the male gaze. Through an analysis of historical contexts, depictions of the sleeping goddess by male artists, and Artemisia Gentileschi's work, we can explore early modern perceptions of gender, highlighting how artistic choices and feminist perspectives differ between male and female artists.



Figure 1.

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1625-26, oil on canvas,
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Analyzing the Sleeping Goddess

Scholars suggest that the suppression of goddess worship coincided with the rise of Christianity. However, the fall of paganism could not “subdue the impulse to worship female incarnations of the divine.”¹ Many local goddesses were transformed into saints, and Christian churches often replaced pagan shrines. A notable example is the Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, built over a temple dedicated to the Greek goddess Athena.² This continuity underscores the enduring need for feminine representations of divinity. This instinct is additionally seen in the popularity of the worship of Mary as the Mother of God. For many worshippers, Mary’s status became equal to that of Christ himself, with an emphasis on her role as the Mother. In a world increasingly shaped by patriarchy, childbirth was one of the few powers exclusively held by women. Men relied on women to perpetuate life, granting them an indispensable role in the continuation of society. In this way, all women, through their ability to bear children, wielded a unique and undeniable form of power.³

The image of a divine feminine figure plays a crucial role in shaping-self-perception. Without a feminine likeness of God to relate to, women risk being relegated to a lesser status in both spiritual and societal hierarchies. Divine representations are therefore crucial—not only for spiritual equality but also for affirming women’s inherent worth and power.⁴

The Roman goddess Venus has been a central figure in art for centuries, serving as one of the most enduring and influential muses in early modern art history. From the decline of pagan worship to the creation of *Sleeping Venus* (**Figure 2**) by Italian Renaissance artist Giorgione (born Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco), the passage of time and the rise of patriarchy drastically transformed how this goddess, long associated with female sexuality and womanhood, was depicted.⁵

¹ Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Women and art: Contested territory*, (Hertfordshire: Eagle Editions, 2004), 24.

² Ibid

³ I note that not all women have a uterus, that not all people with a uterus identify as a woman, and that not all women can/want to bear children. I use the term women to describe those who were assigned female at birth and maintain that gender identity, keeping in mind the typical standards of gender within the periods of time described.

⁴ Chicago and Lucie-Smith, *Women and art: Contested territory*, 20.

⁵ *Venus Sleeping* is traditionally attributed to Giorgione, however it has been thought that Titian completed the painting following Giorgione's death. Both the landscape and sky are overall accepted to be primarily done by Titian's hand.



Figure 2.
Giorgione, Titian, *Sleeping Venus*, c. 1510, oil on canvas,
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden

Sleeping Venus is recognized as the first known reclining female nude in modern Western art history, and established a genre of similar subjects paired with landscapes. When the female nude was initially popularized in early modern art, mythological women were mainly used as muses. This allowed the artist to “distance the image from the spectator so that, while the nude was apparently sexually available, it did not become sexually threatening.”⁶ These women were otherworldly and therefore available to be rendered in ways that real, living women were not socially and morally allowed to be.

Giorgione’s painting is a clear example of the male gaze as manifested in the art world. “The male gaze,” Mary Devereaux explains, “involves more than simply looking; it carries with it the threat of action and possession.” The power to possess is not reciprocal.⁷

⁶ Chicago and Lucie-Smith, *Women and art: Contested territory*, 102.

⁷ Mary Devereaux, “Oppressive Texts, Resisting Readers, and the Gendered Spectator,” (*Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, 1995)

Giorgione's *Venus* lays on the ground, reclining atop a silvery-white textile that contrasts against a deep crimson pillow supporting her head, creating a striking balance of light and shadow. Her body is positioned diagonally across the canvas, drawing the viewer's eye along the curve of her figure. One arm is raised and bent behind her head, granting access to a view of her breasts. The other hand rests suggestively at her groin, with her fingers curled inwards. Venus's body is depicted as unblemished and smooth, with a flawless, almost ethereal quality. She obviously sleeps, as the title suggests, as her eyes are shut and her features are soft. The background of the painting features a quintessential Venetian-inspired landscape, with rolling hills, distant mountains, lush trees, calm waters, and quaint buildings scattered throughout. The landscape's fertile, abundant qualities could symbolize Venus's role as a goddess of fertility. Little is known about the meaning behind the painting or its relationship to other representations of sleeping women. Scholars have discovered that the work had been commissioned by Girolamo Marcello as a wedding present.⁸ Images of Venus, often nude, were often commissioned for weddings. They were meant to both visually please the groom and visually inspire the bride.

In 1603, Italian artist Annibale Carracci produced *Sleeping Venus* (or *Sleeping Venus with Putti*) (**Figure 3**). Here, Venus lays in a lavish bed placed outdoors, surrounded by tens of putti. Similarly to Giorgione's *Venus*, her arm is raised and bent behind her head. Her other hand is not directly on top of her groin, but it does rest between her legs. The title may suggest that the goddess is sleeping, but a quick visual analysis shows that she could be described more fittingly as *posing*. The fingers of her right hand are flexed straight, as are her toes. Everything about her pose is both uncomfortable and unnatural. Around her, putti talk to one another, climb trees, play instruments, and overall act like rowdy babies. Yet, as the title insists, she sleeps.

⁸ Udo Kultermann, "Woman Asleep and the Artist," (*Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 11, No. 22 1990), 136.