

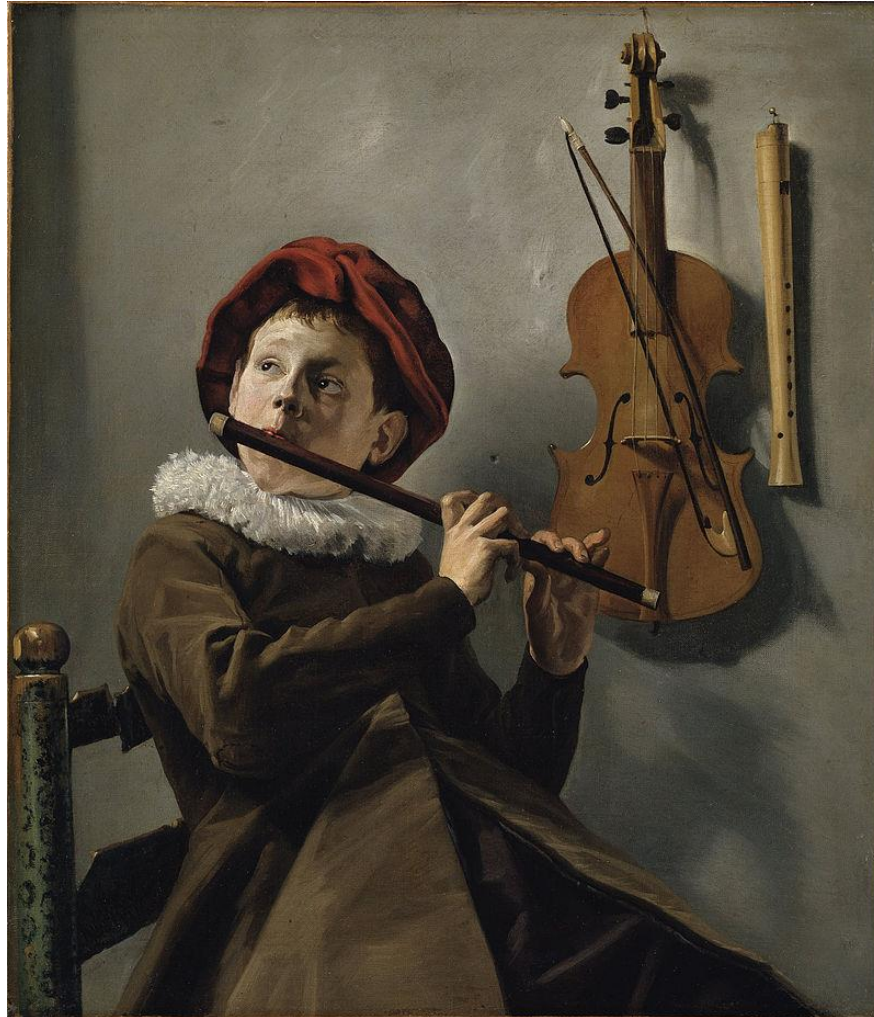
Freeland's *Art Theory*

Chapter 5 – “Gender, genius, and Guerrilla Girls”

Chapter overview

- Chapter 5 surveys feminist approaches to art theory.
- Feminist theorists aren't only interested in **revising the Western artistic canon** in order to include more women, but also in understanding **why** there aren't many women in it.
- Another important topic in feminist art theory concerns the ways in which **women** and femininity **have been represented in art**. The assumption is that art both reflects and promotes oppressive views of women.

The case of Judith Leyster



Judith Leyster, *Boy playing the Flute* (ca. 1630)



Judith Leyster, *The Happy Couple* (1630)

Revising the canon

- The case of Judith Leister is one among many cases of women artists who were neglected by traditional art history, despite being recognized in their own time.
- One of the goals of feminist scholarship in art history has been that of rediscovering female figures in the arts. In painting, some relevant examples are Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1654), Clara Peeters (1594-1657), and Angelika Kauffmann (1741-1807).
- In addition to revising and expanding the canon, feminist art historians have examined the reasons that made (still make it?) harder for a women to become a successful artist.

Institutional obstacles

- In an influential essay, art historian Linda Nochlin (1971) proposed that a simple revision of the canon would not do justice to the problem of the underrepresentation of women in the history of art.
- According to Nochlin, we must look at **institutional factors** that were hindering women from having a successful career in the arts.
- Focusing on painting, Nochlin discusses some such obstacles. For instance, women were not allowed to study the naked human figure from life, and nude figures were considered essential to **history painting**, which was in turn considered the most important genre. As a result, many women artists focused on lesser genres such as the **portrait** or the **still life**.

Theoretical Obstacles: Arts vs. Crafts

- Feminist scholars have observed how some **philosophical concepts** developed in order to make sense of artistic production and appreciation have also contributed to the marginalization of women.
- For example, it argued that the separation of **arts** from **crafts**, a central idea in Western modern philosophy of art, marginalized women artistic endeavors.
- By the 18th century, Western aesthetics had developed a distinction between **fine arts** (painting, music, literature, drama, etc.) and **crafts** (embroidery, cooking, etc.).
- In this way, many activities that were predominantly or uniquely carried out by women did not count as artistic, although they presented an undeniable aesthetic component.

“Thereby the traditional domestic arts were removed from the history of art proper. This historical change suggests one reason that painting, for example, has had so few “great” female practitioners: historically women’s creative efforts were likely to be directed to the production of domestic wares; when these were shunted into the category of “craft,” women’s presence in the genre of visual arts shrank radically.”

(Korsmeyer 2004)

Theoretical obstacles: Disinterestedness

- Various accounts of aesthetic experience stress its disinterested character: to experience an artwork we must abandon practical concerns and adopt a distanced attitude
- For example, recall formalist aesthetics, which focuses on an object's appearance and brackets all questions about function and representational content.
- Some feminist theorists have argued that this account of aesthetic experience is in contrast with the fact that much art presupposes a male appreciator – it assumes what has been called the **male gaze**.



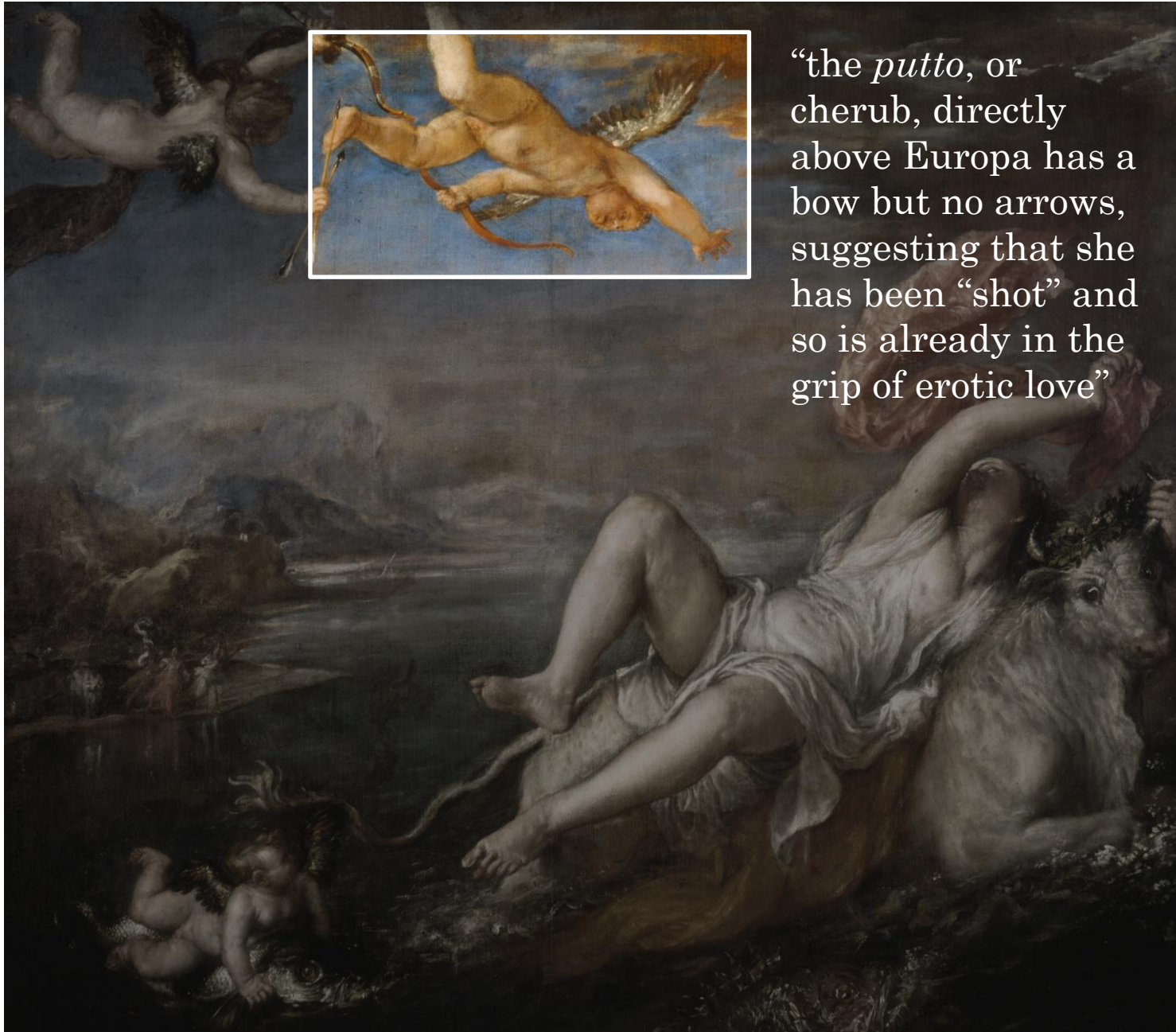
Titian, *The Rape of Europa* (1560-62)

- Anne Eaton (2003) claims that Titian's painting eroticizes the act of rape by presenting Europa not as a terrified, but rather as consenting, and even excited by the experience.
- Eaton grounds her conclusion on an analysis of the picture's representational content, as well as of other pictorial features that convey a particular **attitude** towards that content.

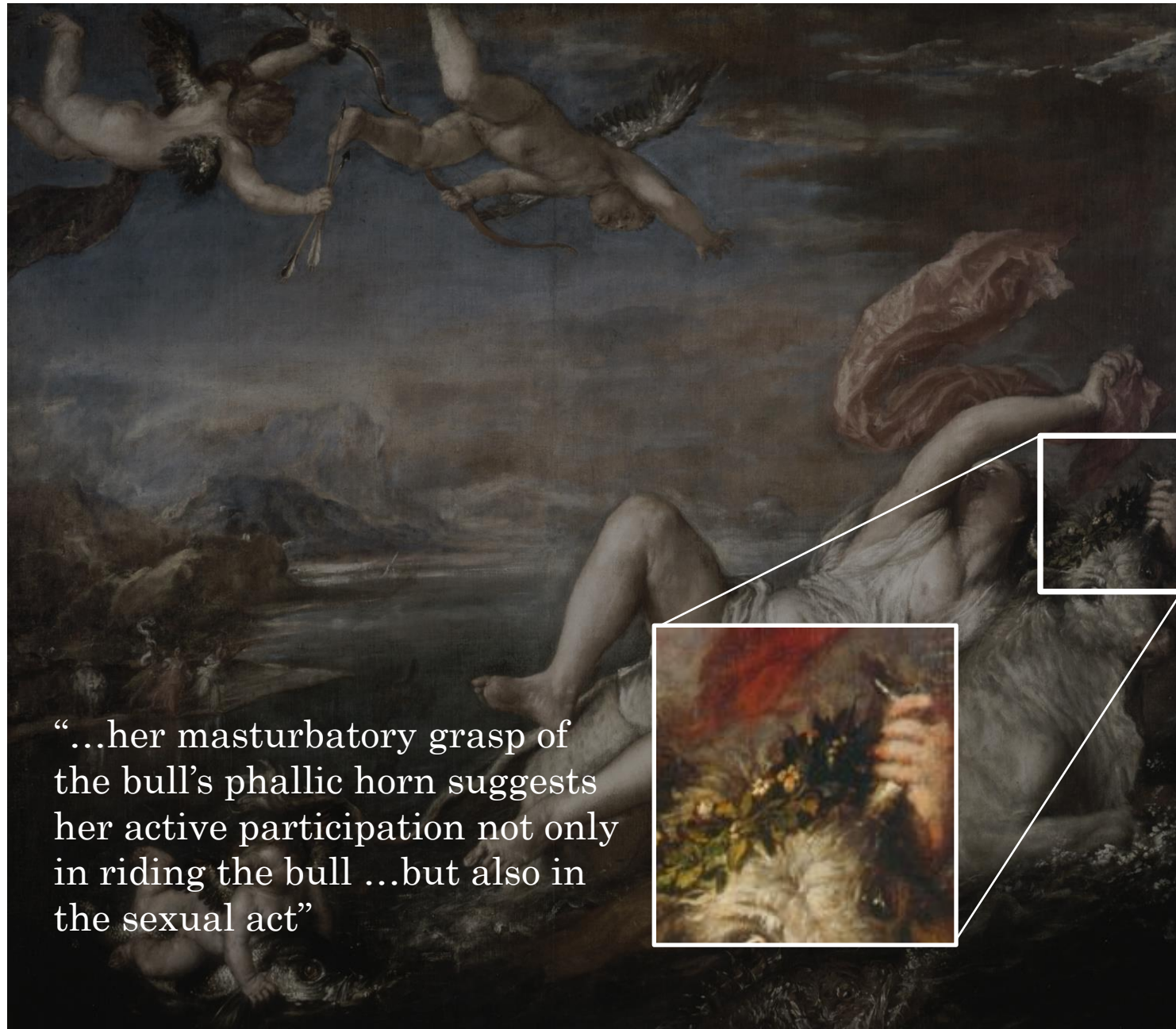
“But the painting does not simply represent rape in a neutral manner. Rather, it *eroticizes* Europa's rape, and it does so along two axes: first, in terms of what it depicts, and second, by calling for certain feelings regarding what it depicts.” (Eaton 2003, 162)

“Europa’s facial expression does not obviously betray distress, fear, or pain, and is often interpreted as a look of ecstasy”





“the *putto*, or cherub, directly above Europa has a bow but no arrows, suggesting that she has been “shot” and so is already in the grip of erotic love”



“...her masturbatory grasp of the bull’s phallic horn suggests her active participation not only in riding the bull ...but also in the sexual act”



“the joyous colors of twilight seem to emanate from her and evoke her passion”

- Eaton argues that these features of the painting result in an specific attitude that the work takes towards its subject matter.
- The painting represents rape as acceptable or even pleasurable, and thereby invites a reaction of sexual excitement on the part of the viewer.

“In this way, Titian’s painting trades on a common fantasy about female sexuality and, in particular, a common fantasy of rape. The basic components of this fantasy are likely familiar. They include the notion that women at least sometimes solicit or otherwise “ask for” rape.” (Eaton 2003, 163)

Class discussion

- Chapter 1 of Freeland's book introduced the concept of artistic **genius**, particularly with reference to the ideas of Immanuel Kant.
- Kant held that the production of beautiful art cannot result from following a set of rules. There is no "recipe" for the creation of art. Art is created by individuals of genius, that is, people who have the **innate ability** to create beautiful objects.
- Do you think that this concept of artistic genius could represent another theoretical obstacle to the recognition of women artists? If so, why?

Theoretical Obstacles: Genius

- The concept of **genius**, for example, is crucial in influential theories of art of the 18th and 19th century, such as those by Kant and Schopenhauer.
- According to these views, a genius possesses an **innate ability** to create art. This downplays the crucial role of **institutions** in the training of artists, as well as other forms of **social conditioning** that may impact an artist's ability to become successful.
- It has been argued that the concept of genius obfuscated the main reasons for the different achievements of female artists compared to male ones, that is, lack of equivalent training and of a supportive social environment.