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Women of the Garden

Centuries of artistic desires have tailored images of the garden, an enclosed area with bounds of vegetation, to their era. In the fifteenth century, Antonio Vivarini and Giovanni d'Alemagna made the garden's walls analogous to Mary's virginal womb. The Netherlandish painter Gerard David propagated this sentiment during the the sixteenth century. Though, in the early seventeenth century with a Dutch painter David Vinckboons, the garden begins to evolve into a realm of theater, abandon, and sexuality. Historians can pin this on the transition of patronage, from the Catholic Church to the Protestant aristocracy. Continuing into the eighteenth century, Jean-Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honoré Fragonard push this even further. The death of Louis XIV meant a lack of religious authority on the country and the aristocracy gained more authority and social liberty. The final work in the analysis, Fragonard's *The Swing,* encapsulates a reversal from the *hortus conclusus* to the *hortus apertus*. Artists still relate the garden with feminine sexuality, but switch from virginity to promiscuity.

Illustrating one use of the garden is Antonio Vivarini and Giovanni d'Alemagna's triptych entitled *The Enthroned Madonna and Child with Angels and the Church Fathers Jerome, Gregory, Ambrose, and Augustine* (fig. 1) from 1446. Antonio Vivarini was one of the early protagonists of the Venetian Renaissance and produced this work with his brother-in-law, Giovanni d'Alemagna[1]. Vivarini and d'Alemagna executed the piece for the Sala dell'Albergo in the Scuola di Santa Maria della Carità, where it still hangs today[2]. In the foreground of the

second panel, Mary sits on a throne with the Christ Child, four angels flank her and hold a canopy above her head. In the first and third panels, four saints—Jerome, Gregory, Ambrose, Augustine—stand around the main group. In the first level of the background, a highly decorated wall in the late-Gothic architectural style surrounds the figures. Behind the wall, is a flourishing orchard covered with small flowers, wild berries, and large fruit[3].

The two dimensions within the painting, the divine inside and the bountiful outside, contribute to the message of the divine virgin. The wall does divide the zones, though as a whole join together to create the reference to the *hortus conclusus*. Within the bounds, objects and depictions of the characters denote Mary's sacred womb. St. Augustine holds a book with the inscriptions "*vere tres sunt unu*" and "*liber trinitas*"[4]. They speak to the truth of the Holy Trinity[5] that allowed Mary to become pregnant whilst remaining a virgin. The golden throne culminates to engulf the space above Mary's head. The interior resembles a shell, which symbolizes the genital organs of a woman. To further this symbol, bivalve mollusks produce a pearl, which is a powerful gynecological and embryological symbol for Christ[6]. The shell also protects the pearl—God has protected Mary, providing her the opportunity to protect and birth Christ. The angels, God's messengers, reinforce this idea as they cover Mary with the canopy decorated in the Scuola's emblem, a cross enclosed in two circles. The book and Mary's gaze demonstrate is her piety towards God's will. Mary looks down with an emotionless face and the book in Mary's right hand is mostly closed, held open by one finger. For the book, or Mary's womb, there is only one being who has been granted access, God. God's overall involvement and presence within the piece signifies the Christian ideals regarding sexuality, of which Mary is held as the pinnacle. In

the second panel particularly, the viewer moves throughout the layers from God's omnipresence and into Mary's biblical purpose.

The outside dimension of the altarpiece is one of fecundity and vegetation. However, it contributes to protect and reflect the divine scene inside. The plants grow tall over the wall and peek through each window. The viewer sees red berries and light green fruits in the green backdrop. It recalls imagery pertaining to the springtime and surrounds the divine with a *locus amoenus*[7]. Beyond the walls, nature reacts to the first dimension by growing as if wanting to peer into the scene. This peering shows nature's observance of the holiness; the inanimate becoming animate with the presence of God. The nature also serves to create a final barrier between the sacred and profane worlds. The plants, an element of the earth are the perfect liaison between the two realms. Nature both acts as a creation of God and a representation of Earth. The vegetation recognizes the holy scene and refuses to allow it to be exposed to daily profanity. The outside flowers and fruit are repeated in the Madonna's throne and in the monochrome panels behind the four Church flowers[8]. This creates a unity within the painting, two dimensions are presented, but both work for the same cause of ensuring Mary's role as protector and virgin.

Reiterating the same themes, but from a different geographical location is Gerard David's early sixteenth century work, *The Virgin and Child with Saints and Donor* (fig. 2). This painting shows that even sixty years later the populous was still associating the symbol of the garden with Mary's divinity. Evident by David's Netherlandish roots and the production of the work in Brugge is the widespread nature of this theme. There is evidence to support that de Capelle commissioned the work for the altar of Saint Catherine in the chapel of Saint Anthony in the church of Saint Donatian's in Brugge[9]. Depicted to the left and right of Mary are the patron,

Richardus de Capella, Saint Catherine, Saint Barbara, and Mary Magdalene[10]. Saint Catherine's attribute is at the base of her left leg, a wheel and sword[11]. Mary Magdalene holds an ointment jar in her lap, referencing her anointing of Christ[12]. A trailing vine in the background fills the garden and connects two figures—to the left is an angel gathering grapes from the vine and to the right is St. Anthony Abbot[13]. Beyond the garden walls seems to be an imitation of Brugge because while appearing similar, the exact parallels have not been found[14]. This detail, just like the garden in *The Enthroned Madonna*, acts as another barrier separating the sacred and profane. Although there are elements of the earthly realm, the divine garden still cannot be set on an earthly plane.

The scene ruminates outside of time, adding to the metaphysical message of the painting. Anachronistic symbols combine to perpetuate how the whole story of Catholicism, as also seen in the *Enthroned Madonna*, is sacred rather than the depicted moment. The Christ child sits among saints who lived almost 250 years after his death, the grapes that the angel picks alludes to Christ's passion[15], the ring that Christ hands to St. Catherine refers to her martyrdom, Mary Magdalene's ointment recalls the anointment of Christ's feet, and the patron was born in the fifteenth century. The patron kneels in a plain grey surplice, he looks old, tired, and his grey hair is thinning and his face is bloodless[16]. He craves redemption and rejects most of his worldly possessions, having only a pilgrim's staff, a prayer book, hat, and dog in front of him[17]. The figure of the patron creates a dichotomy between the earthly plane and the astral one. He looks past the saints as if in a dream, having transported himself into this scene through the intensity of his prayer[18]. Again, the viewer is able to see how the whole of Catholicism is displayed within the garden—the story of Christ, the centuries of devoted followers, and the hierarchy of the

institution. All of this would not be possible without the mythology surrounding Mary's virginity. She is the garden, she is a closed environment that has produced some of the most beautiful vegetation. The cloth's intricate details hanging behind Mary's head reflect garden imagery and echo Mary herself. At the base of her seat, to the left are lilies symbolizing her virginity and to the right are irises symbolizing her faithfulness[19]. These are two of the most basic points of Catholicism, echoed by the two marble pillars. Solid and monumental, they reach to the infinite. Virginity and faith are the foremost bases of Catholicism that enable Mary to become an in-finite being.

One hundred years later, the imagery and ideas associated with the symbol of the garden were beginning to evolve away from the divine. Even within the same culture, the garden turned into a space of lavish spectacle and sexuality. David Vinckboons' *Society Playing Outdoors* (fig. 3) from 1610 is a prime example of such transition. The viewer sees a scene of music, dance, and folly happily encapsulated by the trees. Among these characters an air of social decorum interacts with sexual undertones. Firstly, music and alcohol have definitely gone hand-in-hand to create such motion and emotion. The piano, lute, flute, and guitar are all concurrently being played. A look at the bottom left corner reveals giant glass bottles, presumably not water judging from the figures' behavior. Beginning with the bottom left corner, a man is stealing the alcohol and places it into a sack. Continuing to the right is a man lying on another woman, then another couple in conversation, the music players in the middle, a man calling a woman to dance, and finally in the bottom right corner another couple sitting very closely to each other.

For the early seventeenth century, this is a far cry from Mary's virginal womb. Though, one scholar, Korneel Goossens, does give the potential origins for such contrast. The motif has a

double ancestry in fifteenth century love-garden tapestries (example in fig. 4) and Renaissance representations of the feast of the gods[20] (example in fig. 5). The dark and secluded environment allows the characters to feel at ease and relax with the people around them. However, there is a duality portrayed in the posturing. On one hand, they have relaxed and done away with proper manners. On the other, this manner has been so engrained in their movement that the effort to abandon their manners has turned theatrical. Though, the effort to relinquish such manners is evident. The outstretched arm of the man lying down, the pointed toes of the dancing man, and the music add to the viewer's feeling that this scene is a staged show. In fact, the dog that usually symbolizes fidelity either to God or to a marriage, has gotten up and walks away from the group. This is no place for fidelity and an adherence to tradition. Vinckboons, as one critic noted, is no stranger to having expansive landscapes backdrop for what happens to man in nature[21]. The overgrown nature provides a perfect sense of enclosure and safety for the wild group. A rigid amount of tradition is certainly on display, no matter religious or not; however, the viewer begins to notice a decay in desire to adhere to the traditions.

Historically speaking, the southern part of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century was under Habsburg rule. Only in 1581 did the Netherlands establish themselves as a Republic, free from Spain. Therefore, the North was under the influence of the Protestant church until the end of the Thirty Years' War with Spain, which ended in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. Furthermore, the socio-political relationships with Spain, according to critic Korneel Goossens, influenced Vinckboons. For a few years before and after the Twelve Year Truce signing in 1609, Vinckboons made paintings satirizing the Spanish invaders. Although there is not explicit evidence supporting this, the fashions of the character do tend more to the Spanish aesthetic

(example in fig. 6) rather than the Dutch one (example in fig. 7). Political power was with the parliamentary representatives. The wealthy and educated middle classes in northern territories demanded art reflecting themselves living a sumptuous lifestyle[22]. Also, they were not shy about having their worldly splendors put on display, contrary to de Capelle. Catholicism did not oblige Dutch patrons to depict Christ. However, the viewer must keep in mind that this painting's theatrical element could be satirical due to Vinckboons' own desire to comment on the Spanish overindulgence and disregard for morality. Though the most relevant point being that he chooses to represent Spanish immorality in a secluded garden.

Following this notion even one hundred years later was France. After the death of Louis XIV in 1715, the etiquette that once controlled the court's behavior was no more[23]. Louis XIV had been a lid for the society, he held his subjects to such a high moral and religious standard that with his death society boiled over[24]. One contemporary chronicler wrote, "Never had one seen so little sadness at the death of a king"[25]. The debauchery, drunkenness, and impiety that once hid under the late monarch, now spread without question, aided by the actions and reputation of the Regent, the Duc d'Orléans[26]. All aspects of French life had been changed to fit a looser lifestyle: public dances were inaugurated, the stiff gowns transformed into silk, the monumental furniture gave way to the undulating and detailed, and the heroic artistic character became the amorous scene[27]. The time period is beautifully and wistfully encapsulated in the artist of Jean-Antoine Watteau. His painting *Venetian Pleasures* (fig. 8), exemplifies the theatrical, idyllic, and sensual artistic desires of the early eighteenth century and is along the same imagery as Vinckboons' works.

Venetian Pleasures focuses on a portly man trying to engage a young woman. Amidst the two, are other adults relaxing in the grass. To the left, behind the figures, a waterfall with an above sculpture of a female reclining nude. In the middle, a concrete vase situated atop the wall that frames the waterfall. Surrounding this scene, furthermore, are bounds of foliage that Watteau paints with a detailed deep green and brown. Watteau's delight in the theatrical and the illusion are on display before the viewer[28]. The main couple is a perfect example of the contrived postures throughout the work. The man thrusts his chest forward, places his hands on his hips, and extends his leg forward. She, reacting, holds her dress out with both hands, and seemingly flutters over towards him. Watteau's lighting of her acts as a spotlight, drawing attention to her as the main character. Though, if she is the main character, what is the play? The figures surrounding her are mostly engaged in doing nothing, but with the utmost of grace and attitude[29]. The way in which the hands are rested, heads tweaked, and backs straightened allude to the drama. Amongst all of this posture, the figures pair into couples or groups of three and talk intimately with each other. Firstly, they are sitting, which would never have happened in the courts of Louis XIV. Also, the sexes are blending haphazardly denying any sort of social tradition regarding courtship. Such a balance that must exist between manner and guile. A new way to socialize has developed within the confines of nature, either the people allowing themselves to express their true nature or nature bringing out a different attitude within them. Either way, Watteau presents the garden as an area conducive for a looser social atmosphere.

Though, the viewer must ask, why do these characters allow themselves to feel at ease? Watteau was the pioneer figure in creating a new genre of painting, the *fêtes galantes*. This specifically pertains to eighteenth century garden scenes with figures reclining, dining, dancing,

and/or socializing. However, the genre communicates more than just superficiality. It comments on the desire for an escape to an idyllic realm. Such *fêtes galantes* were evolving from the organized, monarchic, and liturgical functions of Versailles to private and increasingly bourgeois *assemblées* in Meudon, Sceaux, and Paris[30]. A symbol in this work that points to a longing for an experience outside of reality is the reclining female nude above the waterfall. Previously referred to as a sculpture, the viewer must question whether she is, indeed, a sculpture. The way in which Watteau painted her makes it very ambiguous. She is not a solid rock, but definitely not flesh. She is like a sheer piece of fabric, dainty and seductive. She precedes over the whole scene: Is she just basking in the festivities or being the puppeteer of the play? Is she just any girl, or Venus[31]? Previous artists, such as Giorgione (fig. 9), employed the female reclining nude as a reference to Venus and furthermore depicted foliage and flowers amongst her. In Watteau's work, it is as if Venus has invoked the characters with the attitude and abandon necessary to achieve such a distance from the confining social order of the eighteenth century.

Evolving from this time period was no less amount of social decorum. The impulse to escape and indulge was building and still artists were setting the eighteenth century Arcadia in a garden. Jean-Honoré Fragonard's 1767 masterpiece (fig. 10), *The Swing*, exemplifies the left side of a spectrum in which *The Enthroned Madonna* sits properly on the right. As a poof of pink flutters through the air, the viewer can understand the not-so-subtle nuances present. Controlling the swing is an older gentleman, having been covered by a shadow, who sits on a bench. He smiles and tugs the ropes, though he is unaware of the other gentleman[32] in the bottom left hand corner. This other gentleman, extending his arm and hat, lies down in a patch of overgrown wild roses, while he gazes underneath her dress. Noticing the broken fence around the patch, he

probably should not be there. Meanwhile, she looks down at him with a mischievous and tawdry smirk[33]. She flicks one of her shoes into the air, while the other shoe is just about to fall off. These two figures represent the two dimensions of the painting. The one of courtly manner and obligation is represented as the outsider, in shadow. The other, of folly, is where she transports herself to and only lives within this garden.

The symbols surrounding the main three figures continue a dialogue emphasizing their relationship. To the left, directly above the other man, there is a sculpture of a cherub with his finger to his lips. He wishes to silence what is happening inside of the garden, as not to make the gentleman outside aware of their pursuit of one another. Love and the rising tide of passion is the theme of this scene. Emphasized by the two cherubs below the woman who ride on a fish, the goddess of Venus is once again amongst them[34]. The cherubs represent Cupid, Venus' son, and the dolphins associate with the water from which Venus was born[35]. Furthermore, Venus' floral symbol, the rose, is abundant throughout the work[36] from the plants themselves to her dress. Another peculiar item is the other man's hat. One critic, Donald Posner, has connected the hat to contemporaneous works[37]. Fragonard's *The Wardrobe* (fig. 12)[38] and another print, entitled *The Cage and the Bird* (fig. 13), show an indispensable use of the hat. In both cases, the men use the hat to cover over their erections. Contrary, although still carrying the visual culture of its time, the other man's hat has been unabashedly removed from, one can assume, his nether regions. He is freely showing that he is sexually interested in the woman. The garden, like him, is out of control, though fertile and abundant[39].

Perhaps in a culture overwhelmed by ceremony and control over the body, such games should not come as a surprise. Vertigo games, as the critic Jennifer Milam, describes, are ones

that give a sense of disorienting motion and an excuse for acting improperly[40]. The swing is a perfect example of such a game, as are Blind Man's Bluff (fig. 14) and a seesaw (fig. 15)[41]. The legs must come up in the air, the woman is allowed to scream, and her torso can sway loosely. It is one of the few moments in which expectation is suspended and the woman has an excuse to show her own sexuality. Physically, she is revealing her genitalia to the other man, but she is also revealing the carnal level of her being. The garden, as depicted by Fragonard, has provided an encouraging environment for the reveal. The garden has made a transformation from a *hortus conclusus* to a *hortus apertus*, open to social deconstruction and sexual identity.

The five images selected and just discussed only represent a larger portfolio of works that generally follow similar ideologies. Political and religious structures were transforming, giving new power and desires to the populous. From 1446 to 1767, the evolution of the depiction of the garden reflects the social changes. Catholicism acted as subject and patron, meaning that their strict ideals were the only forms of imagery and information available. However, as Catholicism becomes less influential in The North and spreads to France by the mid-eighteenth century, artists depicted their time period's secular opinions and desires. In the changes, remain certain consistencies. For example, the garden represents some element of sexuality and it is a space removed from reality. Whether this means the control of Mary's sexuality or the allowance to express one's own sexuality, the main focus is always of the feminine. Ultimately, however, the garden is situated away from the daily life, whether in a realm of divinity or in an ex-urban wood. What is the garden to us, today? Is there a difference in feeling regarding the garden, a park, a backyard, or a forrest? How has our connection to nature been affected by social, religious, and political contemporary events? Do woman need socially acceptable places for

sexual exploration? All just questions to ponder as looking back in history reveals ingrained social standards and behaviors.

Appendix

Figure 1

Antonio Vivarini and Giovanni d'Alemagna, *The Enthroned Madonna and Child with Angels and the Church Fathers Jerome, Gregory, Ambrose, and Augustine*, 1446. Egg tempera and linseed oil with raised gesso on canvas, 344 x 203 cm. (central panel); 344 x 137 cm. (side panels). Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy.

Figure 2

Gerard David, *The Virgin and Child with Saints and Donor*, 1510. Oil on oak, 105.8 x 144.4 cm. The National Gallery, London.

Figure 3
David Vinckboons, *Merry Company in a Park*, 1610. Oil on oak, 41 x 68 cm. Academy of the Fine Arts, Vienna.

Figure 4

Unknown, *The Gift of the Heart*, c.1400 - 1410. Tapestry; wool and silk, 2.47 m x 2.09 m. The Louvre, Paris.

Figure 5

Giovanni Bellini and Titian, *The Feast of the Gods*, 1514 - 1529. Oil on canvas, 170 cm x 188 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C..

Figure 6

Titian, *Portrait of Philip II of Spain*, 1551. Oil on canvas, 193 cm x 111 cm. Prado Museum, Madrid.

Figure 7

Frans Hals, *Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Civic Guard Company*, c. 1627. Oil on canvas, 179 cm x 257.5 cm. Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, Holland.

Figure 8
Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Venetian Pleasures*, c. 1718 - 1719. Oil on canvas, 55.9 cm x 45.7 cm. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Figure 9

Giorgione, *Sleeping Venus*, 1508 - 1510. Oil on canvas, 108.5 cm x 175 cm. Old Masters Picture Gallery, Dresden, Germany.

Figure 10

Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767. Oil on canvas, 81 cm x 64.2 cm. Wallace Collection, London.

Figure 11

Agostino Veneziano, Untitled, 1515 - 1520. Engraving, 16.9 cm x 25.3 cm. The British Museum, London.

Figure 12

Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Wardrobe*, 1778. Etching, 45.4 cm x 61.5 cm, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 13

Eduard Fuchs, Illustrierte Sittengeschichte in secha Bänden Band 3: Die galante Zeit, Teil 1. Volume II. Published in Munich in 1909.

Figure 14

Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Blind Man's Bluff Game*, 1751. Oil on canvas, 117 cm x 91 cm, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, OH, USA.

Figure 15

Francis Hayman, *See-Saw*, c. 1742. Oil on canvas, 1630 cm x 2593 cm, Tate Modern, London

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[2] Ibid, 172.

[3] Giovanna Nepi Scirè, "Antonio Vivarini," in *Renaissance Venice and The North: Crosscurrents in the Time of Dürer, Bellini, and Titian*, ed. Bernard Aikema et al. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1999), 174.

[4] *vere tres sunt unu* (the three truths are one), *liber trinitas* (the book for the trinity)

[5] Ibid.

[6] Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 125.

[7] Giovanna Nepi Scirè, *Renaissance Venice and The North: Crosscurrents in the Time of Dürer, Bellini, and Titian*, ed. Bernard Aikema and Beverly Louise Brown (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1999), 174.

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[23] Pierre Schneider, *The World of Watteau: 1684 - 1721* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1967), 8.

[24] Ibid, 14.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid, 15.

[28] Pierre Schneider, *The World of Watteau: 1684 - 1721* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1967), 69.

[29] Ibid, 54.

[30] Jeffrey Collins, "Watteau and the Fête Galante", *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 38 (Summer, 2005): 695, accessed October 6, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053426.

[31] Pierre Schneider, *The World of Watteau: 1684 - 1721* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1967), 67.

[32] I refer to this man, consistently as "the other man". He is the other, the anti to the society. He also brings out the other side to her.

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[35] For an artistic reference to the trio, look at Figure 11. In literature, these such ideas derive from, but are not limited to, Ovid's Fourth Fasti.

[36] Jenna Marie Newberry, "Venus Anadyomene: The Mythological Symbolism from Antiquity to the 19th Century" (PhD diss., Univeristy of Wisconsin, Dec. 2011).

[37] Donald Posner, "The Swinging Women of Watteau and Fragonard", *College Art Association*, 64 (Mar., 1982): 85 - 86, accessed October 6, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3050195.

[38] A couple opening a wardrobe and furious to find their daughter's lover inside; the young woman is crying on the left, while a nosey crowd is watching the scene on the right.

[39] "Smarthistory", Fragonard, The Swing, 1767, [Oct 1, 2011], video clip, accessed September 28, 2013, Khan Academy, https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=rVI5Sjm0xKI.

[40] Jennifer Milam, "Playful Constructions and Fragonard's Swinging Scenes", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33 (Summer, 2000): 545, accessed October 6, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30054162.

[41] Ibid.