

‘Figure-ing it Out’

An exploration of female perspectives of famous historical/biblical/mythological events through the use of human figures

Who are the writers of history? Who are the people that tell the stories we all grow up hearing? The images we grow up seeing? Are they the unbiased, plain truth? Are they an account told from the ‘right’ side? What fuels human attitudes and ideas? The answer: perspective.

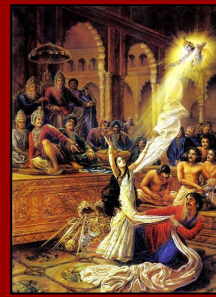
In this comparative study, I will be observing the works *Judith Slaying Holofernes* by 16th Century Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi depicting the murder of Assyrian leader Holofernes by Jewish widow Judith as portrayed by the female artist Gentileschi, Jadurani Devi Dasi’s painting *Draupadi Vastraharan (the disrobing of Draupadi)* which depicts the infamous disrobing of princess Draupadi in the Indian epic Mahabharata as painted by a woman, and *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young N*gress and Her Heart* by black artist Kara Walker in which she appropriates the romanticizing of the Civil War as seen in the book *Gone With the Wind*. Through the selection of these pieces, I have attempted to address this idea of perspective in shaping famous events as depicted with portraiture. In the process, ‘Figure-ing it out’. The female perspectives depicted use the elements of emphasis and contrast to weave in their stories and viewpoints towards these historical, biblical, and mythological events.

1



Judith Beheading Holofernes, 1620, Oil on Canvas, 6'6" x 5'4", Artemisia Gentileschi

2



Draupadi Vastraharan, unknown time period, oil on canvas, unknown dimensions, Jadurani Devi Dasi

3



Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart, 1994, Paper, Overall 13 x 50' (396.2 x 1524 cm), Kara Walker

Image 1: Gentileschi, Artemisia. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. 1620. *Uffizi Galleries*, Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (Italy), www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/judith-beheading-holofernes. Accessed 13 Mar. 2022.

Image 2: Dāsī, Jadurāni Devī. *Draupadī Vastraharaṇa - the Disrobing of Draupadi*. *Tumblr*, kailasanath.tumblr.com/post/176696073944/draupad%C4%AB-vastrahara%E1%B9%87a-the-disrobing-of-draupadi/amp. Accessed 13 Mar. 2022.

Image 3: Walker, Kara. *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred B'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*. 1994. *MoMA*, Museum of Modern Art, www.moma.org/collection/works/110565. Accessed 13 Mar. 2022.

Judith Beheading Holofernes: Formal Qualities

There is movement in this piece through the blood splattering out of the head of Holofernes. When viewing the piece, the splatters of blood immediately draw the viewer's attention to the way in which they perceive the blood to be splattering. This enhances the realistic and striking effect of the blood splattering as Judith cuts off the head of Holofernes.



There is an emphasis on the faces of the women and the head of Holofernes. Through this emphasis, one can see the cold and angry faces of the women as opposed to the terrified face of Holofernes. The emphasis conveys the strength and seriousness with which Judith and her maid committed the murder of Holofernes. The red and yellow also emphasize the figures of Judith and Holofernes. It also draws attention to the bloody and gory beheading.



There is also empty space at the top and bottom of the pieces which additionally contributes to the emphasis on the figures in the center of the composition.



One prominent element in this piece is color. It is interesting how the artist chooses the three primary colors to emphasize each of the figures on the dark background. Judith is depicted on the right side, in a deep yellow. Yellow is often associated with purity, but the deep hue of the color showcases her lack of innocence. Judith's maidservant holding Holofernes down is depicted in a blue to make her blend into the background and allow Judith to stand out. Holofernes is depicted in red, which is a color often associated with violence and hatred. This is the emotion Gentileschi intended for viewers to feel towards Holofernes when observing the work. The bright colors (especially the red and yellow with which Judith and Holofernes are depicted) in contrast to the dark background allow for an emphasis on the subject of the piece, the beheading of Holofernes.

This piece depicts the Biblical scene of the beheading of Assyrian leader Holofernes by the young Jewish widow Judith from Israel to save her people from war. This story was a popular subject of artists in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The Renaissance and Baroque time periods specialized in emotional and dramatic art. Additionally, there was a focus on facial expressions which can clearly be seen in this piece (Discovering Art History).

Judith Beheading Holofernes: Function & Purpose



This piece was either commissioned or gifted to the Medici family. It was banished to a far corner of the museum where it remained until the late 20th century, presumably due to the gore with which it was created, and that it was created by a woman such as Gentileschi in a patriarchal society such as Italy.



Pattern of the spurting blood may have been anatomically correct due to her friendship with scientist Galileo's research on parabolas. In Gentileschi's depiction, Judith clearly channels/becomes 'god' in her slaying of Holofernes.

Scholars argue that Artemisia identified with Judith in a way the men of the time weren't able to because of her personal trauma (Russo). At the young age of 17, Gentileschi was raped by a fellow artist and friend of her father's, Agostino Tassi. In court, Gentileschi described her attempts to attack Tassi with a knife. She also mentions the betrayal she felt when her female consort arranged with Tassi to leave them alone. The first version of this piece dates back to this time in her life and is said to have heavily influenced her portrayal of Judith. She also shows Judith's maidservant Abra aiding her in the beheading of Holofernes in direct contrast to the way her maidservant allowed for her rape. In her second version, she adds small but significant supportive details in enhancing her identification with Judith. Also, on Judith's bracelet, there is the figure of Artemis, the goddess of chastity and 'hunt'. This is significant because it not only corresponds to her name 'Artemisia', but also represents that idyllic 'chaste' women that Caravaggio depicted Judith as being (Cropper 865).

The second version of her piece, depicts her mastery of Baroque realism in showcasing technical and anatomical growth in terms of depicting the human figure. She also enhances her color use and emphasizes the beauty of Judith.



Judith Slaying Holofernes
by Caravaggio



(smarthistory.org)

Judith's story was very popular during the Baroque period in all types of art forms, from literature to theater to music. She was also seen as an earlier form of Virgin Mary and symbol of the church. There was an increase in her portrayal during the late 16th and 17th centuries when the Catholic Church was engaged in conflicts with protestants and ottoman turks - regions associated with Holofernes. The dramatic power of the story made it an ideal subject for Baroque artwork, which was centered around dramatic scenes.

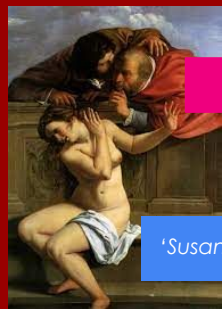
Judith Beheading Holofernes: Cultural Significance



'Lucretia'

This painting is one of the bloodiest and graphic depictions of the event. It much surpasses the depiction by Caravaggio in its realism. Gentileschi was actually inspired by Caravaggio's depiction and additionally enhanced some of his elements through the physicality, gore, and the strength of Judith through her murdering (Cropper).

In her version, the blood is immediately seen as a focus of the piece, as opposed to the minimal blood spill in Caravaggio's version. There is also a clear difference in the way Gentileschi portrays Judith as opposed to how Caravaggio depicts her. In Caravaggio's version, he portrays Judith as a delicate and graceful girl hesitant to commit murder as her old, gaunt maid looks on with disbelief and apprehension (Cropper 865). Holofernes is also depicted in an attacking position, his muscular frame and aggressive nature highlighted in the way he is positioned. This clearly establishes a superiority in men as opposed to the delicate nature of women. Gentileschi's work greatly contrasts this traditional portrayal because she depicts both Judith and her maid in a strong, firm position. They are deliberate in their movements and their expressions are stern, unlike Caravaggio's hesitant depiction. Additionally, Holofernes is depicted in more helplessly in Gentileschi's work. The traditional roles of men and women in society were challenged through Gentileschi's portrayal of this scene. Additionally, the creases on Judith's arm show the tension and strength she uses to behead Holofernes, depicting her power.



(Wikipedia)

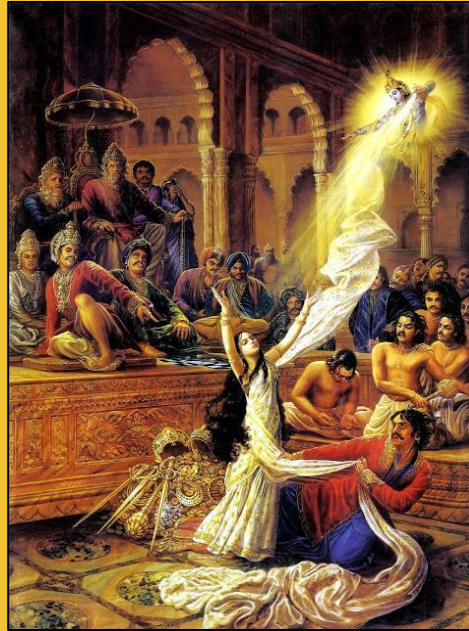
'Susanna and the Elders'

Gentileschi's main protagonists tended to be strong women that engaged in activities like killing, suffering, and reasoning. This was the first time women were depicted in such a capacity (Cropper 865). Her pieces such as *Susanna and the Elders*, *Lucretia*, and *Cleopatra* portray this theme. In these pieces, she connects art and feminine representation (Russo 243).

In this piece, there is emphasis towards the god Krishna and his connection to draupadi. This is the focal point as it is the brightest part of the piece and the lines radiating from Krishna emphasize his presence. It allows viewers to see the main point of the piece which is their connection. The men depicted sitting on the right and left sides of the piece are also drawn to the center as the point of emphasis. This emphasis is enhanced by the difference in hues of the foreground and background. While this piece is created in mostly an analogous color scheme, the white color of Draupadi helps to draw an emphasis towards her presence and particularly the highlight on her face helps to show her ethereal peace even while being disgraced.

An important element in this piece are lines because there are lines throughout the piece in the architecture, through her dress, and through the lines radiating from Krishna. This helps add to the emphasis on her connection to god. They also add to the realism in her dress and depiction of the scene.

Draupadi Vastraharan: Formal Properties



There is movement in the piece through the way Draupadi is seen spinning around, and the way that her sari is being thrown down to her from above. This helps enhance the emphasis on the sari. The realism in the creases of the sari through which Devi-Dasi depicted this piece allow viewers to draw their eyes down the piece from where her sari is falling.



The color white on Draupadi stands out against the multicolored and more dull background colors. Draupadi and the lord Krishna being the sole parties depicted in white emphasizes their connection and her empowerment at that moment. Devi-Dasi also chose to include gold specks within Draupadi's sari to make her appear bright against the dull background. The contrast between the pure gold in Draupadi's sari and the dull gold riches in the background portrays how Draupadi was more powerful than the men in the room who possessed the world's riches.

This painting depicts the story of Draupadi, which is a renowned tale of the way in which devotion can help save someone from disgrace and doom. As a result of a wager gone bad, Draupadi is dragged from her room and taken to a room full of men to be disrobed. Draupadi is in distress and immediately prays to the Hindu God Krishna to save her. As a result of her prayers, as they pulled on her clothing, more kept appearing on her body. This happened until he stopped. In this piece, rather than portray Draupadi in a helpless, fearful state, the artist chooses to depict her in a somewhat enlightened manner. Rather than fear for her life, she seems to be in a state of peace, which gives her some sort of power over her counterparts. Additionally, in this portrayal, it is the men, rather, who are depicted as scared and confused. There is not much information about the artist of this painting because traditionally, Indian art is most closely tied to the benefactor of the works.

Draupadi Vastraharan: Function & Purpose



When she is being disrobed, she directly addresses all the kings and demands how they, being so-called 'educated' and 'proper' could remain silent while she was publicly disgraced. She was the only one, in a room full of men, that was able to stand up to them and put a stop to the game of dice. It is interesting to note that being the intelligent and well-read woman she is, she is still made an example of. She fought for her own rights when her husbands lost her in their game of dice (Das 228). Through the emphasis on Draupadi's connection to god through the extension of her sari, it is clear that

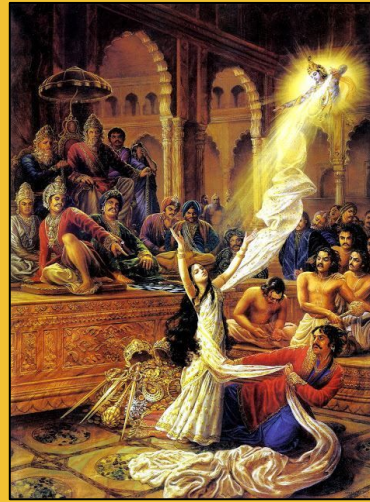


White is a color associated with purity. By depicting only Draupadi in white in comparison to the people around her, it shows her heightened level of purity or 'chaste' in comparison to the men around her. This emphasizes her ethereal connection with god as she is seen as the most pure in a room with powerful men. This helps to refute the notion of the heightened power of men as opposed to women.

The benefactor of this work, or the organization that owns this work is called the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKCON (ISKCON).

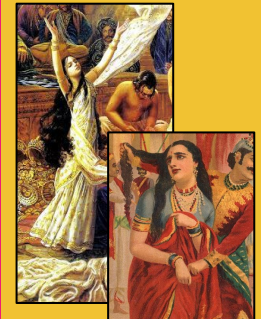
Draupadi Vastraharan: Cultural Significance

In the Indian epic, 'Mahabharata,' Draupadi is the wife of the five royal Pandava brothers. These brothers have an intense rivalry with their cousins which eventually results in a war. In this particular story, however, the brothers are playing a game of dice with their cousins. Without their knowledge, the cousins (the Kauravas) have rigged the game so that the Pandavas always lose. As they keep losing, they keep losing things that they wager. Eventually, they wager even themselves as slaves and lose too. In one final chance to fix everything, they wager the last thing they have, their wife, Draupadi. Obviously, they lose that wager too. Draupadi, at this time of the month, is in her private quarters, a place where no one is allowed. However, the Kauravas send one of their brothers to break down her door and drag her to the room. Draupadi attempts to fight back and counter, but she is unsuccessful. Once she is in the room, the main Kaurava brother directs his brother to disrobe her. Draupadi is in distress and immediately prays to the Hindu god Krishna to save her. As a result of her prayers, as the brother kept pulling on her clothing, more clothing kept appearing on her body to replace it. This happened until he stopped trying to disrobe her. Ultimately, all the men in that room witnessing this event suffer great deaths in the war. It is a lesson not to disgrace a woman.



Like the Greek goddess Athena, Draupadi is said to have been born from fire. She is seen as an early feminist because she wasn't afraid to confront those that brought harm to her family, and she was smart, bold, and provoked her husbands into action (Das 226). She grew up as a well-educated woman and, when provoked, she would challenge men without worrying about the superiority complex that governed much of their society. She was also allowed education unlike many women of the time.

In Draupadi Vastraharan, traditional portrayals of this scene, such as those by Raja Ravi Verma, depict Draupadi as being a scared and passive woman while all the men surrounding her assume a maniacal, implied role of superiority to her. There is a clear expression of fear in her face as she is being disrobed. It is out of this fear that she calls on God to save her from her situation (Google Arts & Culture). Additionally, in this piece, the man pulling on her clothing seems scared of the state she is in, making her seem even more powerful.

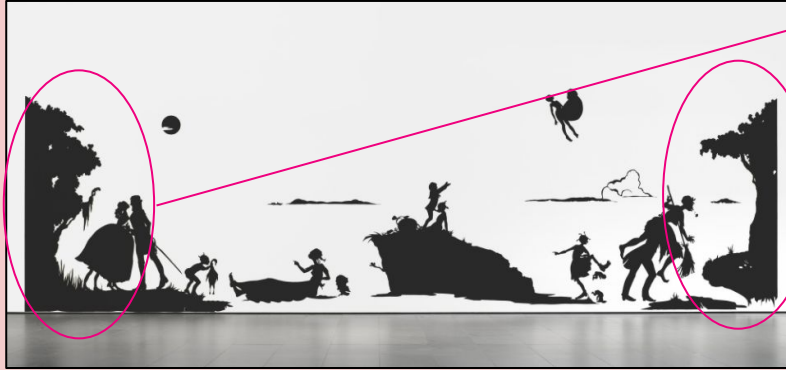


'Draupadi Vastraharan'
by Raja Ravi Verma

(Google Arts and Culture)

Space is a prominent element in this piece because she depicts the scene using only black set against a white background. This is a negative space art piece, helping the emphasis be drawn back to the scene in black. Both the white and black space are clearly open for viewer interpretation. This use of space emphasizes the collectiveness of the art for viewer interpretation.

Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart: Formal Properties



There is balance between the left and right side of the piece because there is nature framing the whole piece on both sides and figures evenly spread out throughout the piece. This allows for a unity to be achieved across the piece for the viewer and allows them to see a contrast between a perceived unity in the piece with the harsh disunity that actually exists inside.

Contrast is used through the portrayal of the harsh differences between the black scene and the white background. This allows for the black scene to be emphasized as it stands out greatly against the white background. The images depicted in the negative space are also very striking and for the viewer. The creation of contrast makes it so the viewer has no choice but to confront the harsh truths depicted in the images.



There is movement because the viewer's eyes start on the left side and through the positions of the figures and the scenes around them, our eyes slowly move to the right side of the piece as it tells a story. However, it may not be necessarily true that the viewer starts from the left side and moves to the right side. Since the depictions in the piece are independent of each other for the most part, there is more movement seen in the individual depictions of the subjects, such as in the man floating away, and in the women with children falling out of her.

This piece is a giant wall installation made of cut-out paper pieced together to tell a 'story' to the audience. In this 'story', there are enslaved people on leashes, a woman giving birth to her child standing up, and many other profane images. However, these images portray exactly what antebellum south and slavery are perceived as being. This piece is a play on the story 'Gone with the Wind', in which the Civil War period is heavily romanticized. Through the use of the silhouettes, Walker allows the viewer to fill in all the little details about each of the scenes. This allows for audience participation, but also complicity because of the assumptions being made about the subject matter and story. The size of this piece allows for audience immersion, and hopefully, allows them to assess their preconceived notions to fix them. Her work is often seen as 'revolting' because she doesn't hide behind 'white-approved' versions of the story. She shows us the ways people traditionally view black people and culture of this time through stereotypes.

Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negrress and Her Heart: Function & Purpose



Walker was clear that she wanted this piece to address the extremely racist preconceived notions that people in America had toward Black people stemming all the way from the antebellum era to 21st century America. She emphasized the desire to confront the myths about the absence of humanity in black people, and women through the images like the woman with babies falling out of her, the man with the enormous penis, etc (Walker 75).

She clearly emphasizes the 'hyper-sexuality' myth existing when it comes to black people as a direct product of colonialism and Western influence (Walker 282). Additionally, Walker feels that her art addresses the underlying currents of masked disasters that were washed away by society but never fully resolved. The hyper-exaggerations of the features and profane images portrayed will force viewers to confront their subconscious and implicit biases in relation to the images seen in the piece (Walker76).



(Wikipedia)

She revives the eighteenth-century cut-paper silhouettes to critique and appropriate historical narratives of ethnic stereotypes during the period of slavery. Cut-paper silhouettes were a popular form of art that most often depicted the profile of a sitter in all black against a square, light background (Chernick). The example below features a powerful-looking white male depicted in this form. Clearly, this style of art was used predominantly in Western countries (like America). By depicting her subjects in black silhouettes, Walker emphasizes the role of Western influence in the prevalence of the various images depicted.

Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart: Cultural Significance



The title of this work refers to the novel *Gone with the Wind*, which takes place during the Civil War. In this novel, this period is immensely romanticized. Walker portrayed this romanticism through her work and ultimately aims to convey how fake the construct of whiteness is in society and the ways in which we as a culture accept it (moma).

The African body became somewhat of a fetishized 'trope' in the Western gaze that they could control. From the earliest encounters with Europeans and Africans, there was a strong notion of differentiation between the two races. The Western cultures started to use the black body as a central element against their cultural and moral identity (Walker 283). It is stated that the African body was essentially 'fabricated not found' (Walker 284).

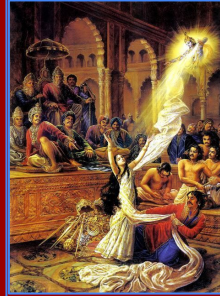
The book *Gone With The Wind* was created at a time which many Americans still subscribed to racist notions towards black people (Leff 146). Margaret Mitchell also maintained a paternalistic and superior view toward black people in her existence (Leff 149). Through her characters in the book, she showcases what a 'good' African American was in the character of Mamie. Essentially, she stereotypes black people as either outright barbaric, or elder motherly figures in her glorification of the antebellum south (Leff 152).

Formal Properties

This piece is the most 'realistic' of all of them. It depicts a real event with real proportions and looks as if it could have been drawn from observation. This enhances the effect of the piece because it looks as though it actually happened which greatly increases its effect on the viewer.



Color is a prominent element in both of these pieces because the subjects are depicted in contrasting colors to the background in order to stand out. In Gentileschi's piece, the subjects are depicted in three primary colors to make them stand out against the dull brown background. In Devidasi's piece, the subject is depicted in white in contrast to the colorful and busy background. Both of these uses of color help the subject(s) stand out.



This piece is figurative in that it emphasizes certain features of draupadi like her proportions and the expressions of the men in the background. Additionally the piece incorporates a variety of color rather than just a select few colors. The other pieces stick to a smaller range of colors in comparison to this piece. As a result, the focus is depicted without color to emphasize her figure.

Both of these pieces utilize space to emphasize the focal point. The empty space at the top and bottom of Gentileschi's piece help emphasize the subjects in the middle. The negative space in Gone helps emphasize the scene in black because of its intensity.

All three pieces contain a sense of movement to depict their meaning. Struggle is depicted through meaning through retelling a painful experience or series of events.

Both of the focal points are depicted in black or white. They use this one color to collectivize the subject, or leave all interpretations of the subject to the viewer, unlike in Gentileschi's piece which depicts the antagonist in a bright red color, making the viewer associate the piece with something bad.

Gone is an installation piece using cut out silhouettes to tell a story based on the viewers' interpretation. Because it is cut-out paper, the work isn't technical or literal perse. The use of only black and white in this piece allows it a sort of ambiguity. Rather than depicting a specific story or event like the other two pieces, it relies on the viewers' perspective of the cut-out silhouettes to interpret its meaning. As a result of this lack of realism, the piece is more interpretive than specific to a meaning.

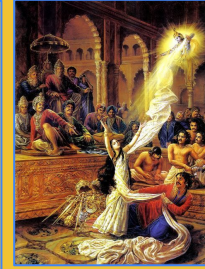


Function & Purpose

This piece was created after Gentileschi's personal trauma of being raped by her father's colleague, Tassi. She decided to enhance the traditional portrayal of Judith through enhancing the physicality, gore, and strength of Judith in her murder. The main motivation was to portray Gentileschi's trauma through the use of Judith as a strong feminine figure.



The traditional roles of men and women in society were challenged through both of these portrayals. Both stemming from mythological origins, Gentileschi depicted Judith in a commanding position, unlike the traditional, delicate depiction of Judith by artists like Caravaggio. Additionally, in Draupadi Vastraharan, the man pulling on her clothing seems scared of the state she is in, making her seem even more powerful.



The purpose of this work, like for many Indian art pieces of the time, was to immortalize a scene of the connection between god and man. In this scene, Draupadi is being 'saved' by god and essentially she is merging with him.

Both of these pieces confront gory truths and intend to evoke an emotion in the viewer whether that is shock at the commanding position of Judith, or a re-examination of previous biases regarding the antebellum south after viewing Walker's piece.

Each of the pieces shed light on the female perspectives of certain well-known 'controversial' events. This is done through the use of cultural references related to gory events in history and mythology

Both of these pieces intend to depict several stories that contribute to a central theme for the viewer. This story is seen through the myriad of different elements within each of the pieces. In Draupadi Vastraharan, the various groups of people in the foreground and background each tell their own story, but contribute to the main story. In Gone, there are several different images depicted across the wall, which also depict individual stories which come together to deliver a central message

This work was mainly intended to gauge the interpretation of the audience. While the other artists were more deliberate in their intentions for their work, Walker wanted the work to represent what the audience saw it as. The intention is for viewers to walk through the life-sized installation and be taken aback by the strangeness of each of the images depicted. Essentially, she wanted to leave the art up to their interpretation as it would allow viewers to confront their implicit and explicit biases toward the antebellum south.

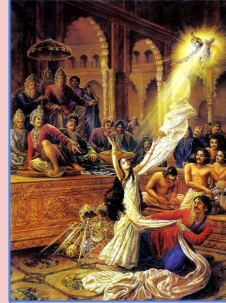


Cultural Significance

Gentileschi was influenced by Baroque art in her creation of this piece. When comparing Gentileschi's rendition of this work to other artworks depicting the encounter between Judith and Holofernes, it seems that Gentileschi's version was intense in terms of the strength of Judith against Holofernes. Many of her female characters were depicted similarly to her self portraits.



Both of these pieces depict scenes and stories that were widely told during their time period of creation. These stories are also associated with religious notions of Virgin Mary in the case of Judith and the Hindu Lord Krishna in the case of Draupadi. These scenes were traditionally depicted by men because they were more powerful than women. As a result, they twisted the story to make the women look meek. These representations refute that notion.



Draupadi was considered specifically to be one of the first 'feminist' figures in Indian mythology because of her strength and intelligence. When she is being disrobed, her strength allowed her to directly address the men who were silently allowing her to be disrobed. The main message of this scene is the caution against disgracing a woman's honor.

Both artists were heavily influenced by previous depictions and renditions of the events depicted. The reason these pieces were created was to combat that traditional depiction of the events with their personal take on them.

Each of the events stand out as well-known because of its grave circumstances, particularly in oppressing a certain individual or group. As a result, many artists and creators have expanded on their implications.

Both artists confront an acceptance that society has created surrounding the depiction of marginalized groups, like women or people of color. Draupadi is being disrobed due to a misogynistic society around her, and Walker confronts the implications of widely known stereotypes surrounding black people.

Walker uses the scenes in this piece to over-exaggerate what stereotypically people assumed the antebellum south to be. She uses specific symbols and ethnic stereotypes during the period of slavery. The title of this piece is also a reference to the famous novel *Gone With the Wind*, which is essentially a glorification of slavery in the antebellum south. Unlike the other pieces, which literally depict an event, this piece exaggerates the racism of the antebellum south where many people essentially believed that enslaved africans were barbaric.



