Contemporary Reframing: An Analysis on Museum's Contemporary Interpretations of Traditional Representations of Female Biblical Figures

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to analyze the contemporary reinterpretations of museums towards handling collections of female biblical figures who have often been intertwined in complex histories and intricately layered discourses. Where some of these depictions have been rooted in androcentrism resulting in sexualized depictions and portraying these figures in manifestations that appeal to male audiences. This poses a problem with normalizing objectification amongst women where this was merely seen as a standard artistic convention which has historically been accepted and rarely questioned. This approach disguises the perpetuation of gender biases which is no longer acceptable within the context of contemporary social issues where society has become increasingly aware, demanding for higher accountability in the messages that are put forward. The portrayals of Susanna and her assailants have been a popular depiction for centuries, painting scenes of her sexual assault in bright vivid colors. The contextualization of Susanna in contemporary museums today is the definitive factor of whether her image will continue to contribute to justifying voyeurism in plain sight or where museums can use this image to send a powerful message instead – challenging and vindicating the narratives of violating a woman's body. Similarly, Mary Magdalene's iconography in art has been heavily shaped and tainted by an allegation, diminishing her sanctity and womanhood – through recent calls to action regarding recontextualizing her identity, institutions have revisited and revised their curatorial narratives depicting her. Varying depictions of female biblical figures stand out which historically have been less sexualized but are popularly depicted for its gore and violence such as the image of Judith. Her story has been used as a symbol of strength but also instills fear over female agency. Contemporary museums have used her powerful imagery linking this together with story of Artemisia Gentileschi, a survivor of rape who had released her frustrations of injustice and gender inbalance on to her craft. This link has uplifted both women to symbols of power and resilience amidst patriarchal domination, heavily resonating with ongoing societal issues. Lastly, the depiction of Esther as a queen dressed in beautiful garments is given greater meaning in shedding light to the reason behind her frequent portrayals during the liberation of the Netherlands from Spain in the 17th century. Transforming her image from a static decorative artwork, to a powerful symbol of freedom. Through analyzing these reinterpretations of contemporary museums, we hold institutions to a higher degree, as a space that both cultivates and reflects cultural practices using collective memory in shaping the future, allowing for a more inclusive and conscious society.

KEYWORDS: *Female Biblical Figures, Contemporary reframing or Interpretation, Curatorial Narratives, Iconography*

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Introduction

For centuries, the art world has been shaped by the hands and eyes of men — from the artists who have crafted to the collectors who have consumed (Nochlin, 1995). It is an observable pattern that artworks have historically favored a female figure as art subjects – depicting women in various forms, using their sexuality as a captivating element. This trend has led artists to expand their imagination in order to create compelling pictures often resulting in exaggerated depictions of eroticism and objectification, and in turn, diminishes the moral character amongst women. Such intense depictions have been widely popular throughout art history; it is as if these paintings have been created to cater to the male gaze (Berger, 1972). This phenomenon of female objectification excludes no one; even biblical figures who were traditionally honored for their virtue, have been painted in their most vulnerable, scandalous and shameful moments for the sake of creating visually enticing works of art – at the expense of devaluing their sanctity (Exum, 2019). This concern appears to be particularly prevalent in the Western world, perhaps not solely in the West, but it is clearly more rampant compared to other regions that do not seem to share the same apprehension – while this is not the main focus of this study, it is still worth noting (Cuesta Davignon, 2020). These images of sexualized female biblical figures are derived from long and complex histories, where the root cause has been forgotten and unseen through the images that hang on museum walls today. It is vital for museums to shed light into these complicated pasts, and find new ways in representing these images amidst contemporary concerns. This paper focuses on new ways of approaching these subject matters.

Through these narratives that have been altered, revised and rewritten over the centuries in order to create enticing images, have museums taken the initiative to research these histories further? In an age where society has become increasingly aware, holding accountability for the misdoings of the past, have institutions practiced their due diligence in correcting narratives cemented by art?

Museums have stereotypically been viewed as places that are solely concerned with aesthetics – collecting, conserving and exhibiting beautiful objects; but recent times have called museum practitioners to rebrand and bring forth a different message. In 2019, TIME magazine released an article discussing the debates surrounding the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) plan to redefine the structure of museums in order to foster "human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing" popularizing #MuseumsAreNotNeutral. This goes against critics who argue that museums should not take on political stances and should remain neutral in all aspects. Museums have begun the journey of revising ideologies, realigning narratives that have favored colonialism or curatorial styles that have diminished

marginalized communities, such as those that have been affected by racism and patriarchal domination (Haynes, 2019).

Through modern-day feminist movements, museums have taken on the initiative to become more inclusive in curating pieces by female artists, shifting the spotlight towards historically underrepresented voices through an increase of solo exhibitions by women in institutions such as MoMA (Cain, 2017), Tate London (da Silva, 2020), and the MET (Fuentes, 2024). Acquisition targets for women artists have also seen an increase across several museums, raising it up to 50% within a specific time frame – making women acquisitions at par with men. Prior to this, only around 11% of acquisitions of US museums were by women (Goodchild-Michelman & Liu, 2021; Solly, 2019). Additionally, a number of museums have initiated fellowship programs focusing on women artists such as the Women and the Contemporary Art Programme by the National Gallery London (National Gallery London, 2025; Pollock, 2013). But beyond adjusting to the demands of the present, it is crucial to reevaluate the past as well. Museums should look into their own collections – correcting the long standing *misogyny* that has perpetuated through the walls of museums so seamlessly. The discussion extends beyond merely diversifying and expanding in collections, it presses importance in demanding museums to practice what they preach and internally reflect the principles they advocate, offering not only the women of today, but the women of the Bible justice and honor that have been long denied to them – transitioning these women from objects to subjects.

This leads to a central question: why are these analyses important for museums? As spaces that both cultivate and reflect cultural practices, museums are not static repositories that exhibit objects of the past, but are active participants in shaping ideologies and societal values through collective memory. A museum stands as a pillar for society and through cultural authority, can influence a whole generation with the objects they exhibit, narratives they choose to put forth and voices they amplify within their walls – inevitably echoing beyond the facade of their institution. Museums are not institutions that dwell in the past, they are the foundation that constructs the perceptions of the future. Therefore, critically analyzing curatorial practices and narratives prove to be immensely important to ensure that museums do not perpetuate outdated worldviews rooted in complex and intricately layered histories and instead, foster a more inclusive and reflective dialogue (Huang & Liem, 2022).

Narratives from the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament and the New Testament have been popularly used as a subject in Western art, especially in the Judeo-Christian culture where scriptures of the Bible have been constantly passed down and repeated through religious texts, sermons, literature and social norms, trickling down to the art scene where the Catholic Church played a major role to its development (Indiana University Eskenazi Museum of Art, 2022). These women that have been represented in art are meant to represent key traits – Eve as a symbol of temptation (Dionne, 2023) and

the Virgin Mary representing purity (Foskett, 2022) – using these references to reinforce moral teachings (Indiana University Eskenazi Museum of Art, 2022). Through the years, people have become increasingly aware of historical misconduct and the ignorance of the past, constantly reexamining societal norms and conventions (Chugh, 2022). The emergence of contemporary issues and cultural developments have urged new discussions, compelling curators to revisit and reinterpret traditional imagery. Researching into the history, beyond merely just looking at the surface of artworks, have helped us understand the reasons behind why these images have been shaped in certain ways. The canon events that have led popular depictions of female biblical figures to take on particular appearances culminate in pivotal movements in art history, such as the Counter-Reformation (Indiana University Eskenazi Museum of Art, 2022).

In 1517, Martin Luther's *95 Theses* had a profound effect on the authority of the Catholic Church. This contained a list of propositions academically disputing the teachings of the Catholic Church – particularly the *sale of indulgences* and several hidden forms of abuse and corruption within religious practices. Luther enumerates various arguments regarding how the Catholic Church has monetized salvation. The *Theses* was believed to have been posted on the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church in Germany – a common 16th century practice intended to welcome scholarly debate. This publishing launched the Protestant religion and a widespread movement to convert, prompting the Catholic Church to grow increasingly worried about the loyalty of its followers, commencing the beginning of the Counter-Reformation movement throughout Europe (Wendebourg, 2014).

Through the development of the Counter-Reformation, several decrees issued by the Council of Trent from sessions spanning from 1545 to 1563 focused on reaffirming Catholic teachings and strengthening its grasp to followers through various measures, including the role of art and sacred images in spreading Catholicism. The Catholic Church was one of the biggest art patrons in Europe which gave them the advantage to control the trajectory of art trends, benefiting the Church's ulterior motives. The Church had directed artists to depict narratives from the scriptures where people could be educated and influenced, resulting in the emergence of Baroque art which heavily embodied narrative realism – before Baroque, depictions of religious figures were usually rendered as static and prim (Freedberg, 1989). Although the Council of Trent established strict regulations to this new art movement, it did not always agree with the artistic attributes that spawned from the Baroque movement.

The Council of Trent abolished art forms that evoked carnal desire, with the intention of highlighting modesty and morality as key forms in art to support the Counter-Reformation movement (Soyer, 2015). This decree led to the repainting of Renaissance frescoes and art pieces within the Vatican that displayed the nude human body including Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* located in the front

altar of the Sistine Chapel (O'Malley, 2012). Whilst qualities of Baroque art – despite depicting religious narratives and established through the objectives of the Counter-Reformation – focused on drama and emotion, often picking on risqué biblical accounts and illustrating these figures in sensual, passionate and exuberant manners. The relationship between the motives of the Counter-Reformation and the artistic qualities of Baroque art aligned and diverged incessantly but narrative realism from the Baroque proved to be a pivotal tool for the Counter-Reformation (Preston, 2013). At the time, Protestants were highly rejecting idolatry, destroying paintings of saints and iconoclasm was soaring through Europe. Baroque artists made the daring choice to create depictions of saints in narrative forms that would emphasize intriguing storylines, making visually persuasive images in an effort to save these works from destruction and revitalizing Catholic representations through engaging depictions (Soergel, 2014). The complexity of the relationship between a social and artistic movement complicated the goals during this time period but despite the conflicting ideals between the two, the Catholic Church compromised their ideals in exchange of attracting more attention.

As the Council of Trent continuously reiterates the importance of repentance through their various sessions, suddenly the image of Mary Magdalene and the narrative that has been depicted of her in art becomes incredibly useful to establish this doctrine. Mary Magdalene's narrative and depiction in art is derived from a homily delivered by Pope Gregory the Great (Pope Gregory the Great, Homily XXXIII, 591), which contributed to the enduring assumptions of her identity with that of a repentant prostitute (Schaberg, 2002) – an immensely famous depiction throughout the late 16th to 17th century (Lupieri, 2019). Through the depictions of Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute, she had become the model figure to influence people to reform back to Christ – a motive heavily criticized by the Swiss reformers. Suddenly, the Church is less worried about the strict adherence to biblical narratives and instead weighs more importance to attracting people to Catholicism. During the 25th session of the Council of Trent, the main points in the guidance on religious art were reiterated – artworks should clearly be rooted in biblical narratives and these images should not be depicted in an inappropriate manner. In this session, the figure of Mary Magdalene becomes this odd exception, implicitly referencing her depiction as a sexualized sinner – conflating her identity to the woman in Luke 7 where a sinful woman anoints the feet of Christ – the Council had recognized this association to be truly biblical. In turn, this created a strange trajectory for her depictions in art, sparking debates around humanism and enlightenment yet simultaneously, her contested and controversial story became a favorite for artists and an opportunity to paint an intriguing subject matter (Lupieri, 2019).

The narrative of Mary Magdalene's past life as a sex worker had been repeatedly used to call people to convert, her image hung on several convents where women are expected to reject worldly

luxuries and submit themselves fully to God (Lupieri, 2019) such as the painting *Saint Mary Magdalene renouncing worldly vanities* formerly hung on the walls of the Convent of the Saviour, Braga painted by the sisters of the convent to promote Mary Magdalene as an example of repentance and good virtue (National Museum of Ancient Art, n.d.).

Similarly to the sisters of the convent finding inspiration in her image, women patrons often collected religious iconographies to hang within their private rooms. The practice of collecting religious artworks was seen as a religious incentive deemed as a good deed exemplifying strong faith. The theme of salvation was the main concern for everyone, both male and female and their patronage to art was a way of fulfilling that. Despite collecting styles to be relatively similar for both genders, piety was a trait appropriate for females (Bracken, Gáldy, & Turpin, 2012) and this connotation is a hint to where styles vary, reflecting heavily in contrasting art taste. John Cecil, the 5th Earl of Exeter was known for his extensive art collection from all over Europe, he was fondly named "Travelling Earl" for the 300 artworks he had amassed and displayed within the Burghley House. His wife, Anne Cavendish, Countess of Exeter had her own preferences in collecting art, one of which were religious artworks such as *The Adoration of the Magi* by Nicholas Dixon, *The Virgin, Child and St. John the Baptist* attributed to Jean Petitot the Elder and the altarpiece *Zebedee's Wife Petitioning Our Lord* by Paolo Veronese located in the Burghley chapel. These religious works were displayed in more intimate areas of the home, such as her personal bedchamber, private sitting rooms and places where prayer and reflection occurred (Brigstocke, 2004; The Burghley House Collections, 2025). These paintings collected by the Countess can be described to have more conservative portrayals but on the other hand, contrasting visuals are also seen through the Burghley House, such as the painting of *Susanna and the Elders* by Artemisia Gentileschi acquired by Brownlow, the 9th Earl of Exeter, displayed above the chimney in his private bedchamber. The choice of artwork and placement within the Burghley House can point to reinforcing the theories of the male gaze (The Burghley House Collections, 2025).

In a study by Bryn Mawr College, they looked into Netherlandish prints of the famous Biblical story, Susanna and the Elders, where Susanna is often depicted in compromising positions, in the midst of assault, emphasizing her helplessness and finding beauty and eroticism in her vulnerability. This portrayal meant to evoke a titillating response to its viewers is a problematic yet normalized aspect in art history (Dackerman, 1995). Where women of the Bible Susanna, Mary Magdalene, Judith and many others were traditionally venerated for the values they represented in the scriptures, have been unfairly depicted for the gratification of patriarchal audiences; rather than being admired for their strength, faith and agency. These women were not only tainted by historical biases made in the hands of these great artists, but have

been enduringly cemented and amplified through curatorial practices that have failed to challenge these century-old depictions (Beavis, 2024).

This paper seeks to analyze contemporary reinterpretations of historic depictions of female biblical figures in museum contexts through permanent collections and exhibitions. This critically examines how these women have been traditionally depicted and how institutions choose to reframe their narratives. Where these women, Mary Magdalene, Susanna and Judith have been rendered to benefit issues of the time and oftentimes have been shaped to appeal to the male gaze. Where Mary Magdalene's depictions have been configured by her alleged past life of prostitution rather than her significance as Christ's follower and closest disciple, witnessing his resurrection before anyone else (O'Collins & Kendall, 1987). Susanna who instead of receiving praise for her faith, has been visualized as a willing participant to her own sexual assault incident. Judith, whose courage and strength should be highlighted and remembered, is depicted as vicious and conniving, showing how female agency is dangerous and threatening. These women have endured the injustices of a patriarchal system where their representations have been rooted in shame rather than significance.

This paper aims to uncover whether and how museums actively seek to reevaluate these biases, taking initiative in historical revisionism as society increasingly presses for accountability for the prejudices imposed on women and how these predicaments have been successfully carried out through their curatorial practices.

Purpose of the Study

This paper examines how contemporary institutions have framed the narratives surrounding female biblical figures whose visual portrayals have often been shaped by androcentric trends and complex histories, predominantly through Western art. In continuously allowing the propagation of sexualized depictions, this reinforces issues of gender inequality and promotes a patriarchal system that penetrates beyond the walls of the museums, and into broader cultural and societal spheres.

This paper aims to analyze how museums have done their due diligence in researching the histories of such artworks whilst educating museum goers on these depictions that often stem from complex histories – pressing focus on the practices and curation process. Looking into contemporary museums, have these institutions looked through their own walls, reassessing century-old paintings to open a dialogue that can dismantle long standing gender biases through curatorial narratives while allowing greater meaning than purely focusing on visual aesthetics. This study is vital for both the academic and professional field as it examines the intersections of gender, religion and art while

emphasizing the need to hold accountability for ethical and cultural sensitivity in displaying such works. Therefore, the following research question is formulated:

How do contemporary museums approach the interpretation of female biblical figures in artworks shaped by layered historical and cultural contexts?

This question is broken down into two sub-questions (SQ):

SQ1: How can museums navigate the balance between preserving historical works and presenting them through a contemporary lens?

SQ2: What curatorial strategies were implemented that challenged traditional readings of these figures?

SQ1 aims to uncover how museums navigate the challenge of balancing upholding historical integrity, adhering to the craft of the artist and the perceptions of that time whilst still contextualizing and redressing images deeply rooted in multifaceted histories. While various historical artworks were accepted in the past without issues of critique to their problematic depictions, with the rise of feminist movements in the 21st century, museums carry a moral obligation to reassess these images and contextualize them in ways that can contribute to a more equitable and conscious society – ensuring that these institutions do not continue to perpetuate outdated ideologies, but instead become a backbone in fostering inclusivity and cultural awareness for future generations.

SQ2 is used to identify specific curatorial strategies that have come into play through permanent collections or exhibitions that have successfully reframed the viewer's understanding and has sparked broader conversations that look beyond the surface of the canvas. Emphasizing an importance in analyzing how these strategies educate museum goers about the figure's significance, its history and the ways in which these narratives still continue to resonate in today's society.

Literature Review

Through the use of the ***Semiotics*** theory by Roland Barthes (1972), the usual iconographies associated with Mary Magdalene such as red garments and hair, exposed breasts and a sorrowful deposition (Shore, 2021) are symbols that are not strictly biblical but have been prevalent in art history and have become distinguishing factors in identifying who the artist intends to depict. Through acknowledging this and through the use of semiotics, it has shaped this study and led to realizations where it is difficult and almost impossible to find neutral perspectives through semiotic imagery; but the language used to construct meaning around these iconographies is a different side of this theory. This can be seen most evidently through the exhibition of Susanna where her depictions are heavily eroticized yet the curators have pivoted their narratives to become vindictive and informational. Through probing beyond iconography and using language to direct the thought of audiences, the curators have clearly used their ***Cultural Capital in their Institutional Critique*** (Bourdieu, 1983) to influence people and command a level of credibility through their positionality. Museums have the power to educate, legitimize and even leverage certain discourses posing an immense effect on general knowledge. In this paper, museums have used their epistemic power to redirect worldviews and press greater importance on areas that have been often overlooked. As the paper progresses, the visual representations of Susanna and her perpetrators are examined and influenced by the curators to the viewers. The exhibition tied up the image of Susanna to the popular feminist movement, #MeToo in an effort to contextualize her story to contemporary issues. According to Charles Fourier's definition of ***Feminism*** (1837) the degradation of women throughout history, in labor rights, suffrage and sexual liberation reflects the prevailing androcentrism across generations which stands as the baseline to several feminist movements today. This theory was made useful in uncovering how curatorial narratives have uplifted these women despite controversial iconographies. The portrayal of Mary Magdalene as the *fallen woman* (Nead, 1984) is a striking manifestation of this theory, where female agency is diminished, credibility is disputed and highly emphasizes the constraints of female sexuality. Though, feminism is not solely experienced by women, as more recent developments of this theory also discuss how men can be harmed by patriarchal domination (Hooks, 2004). Where this paper may have been centered around the gender biases that diminish the agency and morality of women, it is still worth recognizing that the men who have depicted these images were also just products of their time – where these prevailing ideologies persisted. These tropes were ingrained and operated without awareness and this is where the contemporary reframing becomes immensely important – museums today do not have the excuse to remain lenient, unknowing and complacent as the previous periods. Following the theory of feminism, Manne's theory of ***Misogyny*** has provided a contemporary lens in interrogating centuries-old depictions. This theory describes how women

have been affected by social hierarchies undermining their status. This can be compared to the positionality of Mary Magdalene compared to the male apostles of Christ. Rather than being the "apostle to the apostles" (Pope Francis, 2016) which would assert her dominance over males, her image is remembered as a penitent prostitute that reflects the societal impositions of male superiority, punishing women who challenge patriarchal beliefs and failing to conform to gender expectations – though pressing blame on the men of these time periods is not the focus on this study, correcting these gendered ideologies and revisiting these narratives in contemporary times has found this theory valuable to be able to address not only the past, but present issues of sexism. In depictions of women, we can observe how they have been portrayed either in a conservative form or in a revealing manner. This can be understood through the theory of Sigmund Freud, the ***Madonna-Whore Complex*** (1912) of how men fantasize women in two extremes, the Madonna and the Whore. This theory gave deeper insight to the opposing depictions of Esther and Mary Magdalene, where these biblical figures seemed to have been depicted to fit into two stringent categories – imposing that they are either one or the other, the pure Madonna or the immoral Whore. Images depicting women as immoral and eroticized has been seen multiple times through this study and its popularity has been better understood through the ***Male Gaze Theory*** (Mulvey, 1975) where artworks have been crafted to please the male perspective, often leading to depictions of women in more sexualized manners to appear more appealing and interesting. Mulvey's theory is a forefront concept in attempting to understand the sexualization of female subjects in art. Curatorial narratives can either replicate this objectification or provide context to the reasons behind it. This theory was significantly instrumental in analyzing the images of Susanna whose depictions revel in sexual assault and how the Gouda Museum delivered their contemporary interpretations. The last theory that has proved useful in analyzing contemporary narratives is the ***Curatorial Complex*** (Gronemeyer, 2018) which seemingly ties all the mentioned theories together nicely. The curatorial rhetorics by museums have imposed a powerful institutional voice to audiences. This voice can lead society to either maintain the traditional perceptions that have been cemented through art history and preserved objects or evolve in conceptions through a nuanced language and tonality. This theory was immensely useful in uncovering whether these institutions have used their advantage to influence a whole generation by initiating dialogues and opening its doors to new knowledge and research – catalyzing a new era of entirely fresh perspectives. The implementation of these theories have offered a thorough analysis to understanding how contemporary museums interpret, thoughtfully display and reframe these depictions of female biblical figures – challenging or perpetuating the complex ways their identities have been shaped.

Methodology

Within this paper, qualitative research is utilized to better explore curatorial approaches to exhibiting female biblical figures with complex histories and oftentimes depicted through a patriarchal lens. Moreover, two research methods have been applied to better uncover various approaches with depth: Document Analysis and Discourse/Conversation Analysis. These research methods are used to examine exhibition texts, labels and institutional materials such as videos. ***Document Analysis*** helps examine how institutions have framed these figures through the narratives they perpetuate whilst ***Discourse/Conversation Analysis*** analyzes the narratives based on the language and tonality used through means of semiotic theory in understanding how these messages come across and shape public understanding.

The use of case studies from four institutions displaying works of Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Judith and Esther – detailed in each of the chapters – despite their difference in visual attributes, all display women of the Bible in ways where they have been sexualized, belittled, demonized – or, even when portrayed decently, their visual representation often leaves out the context of their significance, reducing their representations to purely aesthetics. Thus this study explores how museums engage in proactive measures in contextualizing these women beyond surface-level.

In the Results and Discussions section of this paper, the theories that align to the narratives have been identified and analyzed accordingly. In the appendix sections of this paper, it contains the curatorial narratives of each of the artworks where certain sentences have been highlighted in colors that identify with the theories used to dissect and understand the message put forth by the institutions. These theories provide guidance and understanding of how meaning is constructed, mediated and contested through language. Highlighted in yellow are phrases that identify the language, iconography and curatorial strategies that align with the theory of Semiotics. Phrases highlighted in pink represent gendered statements that are explained using the theories of Feminism, Misogyny, Madonna-Whore Complex and the Male Gaze. Lastly, highlighted in blue is the role of museums as an authoritative voice – asserting their power as a governing institution possessing higher knowledge and credibility. This can be explained by the concepts theorized by Pierre Bourdieu, tied together with theories of Curatorial Complex that discuss the power of the institutional voice. By combining these theories to a singular framework, this study aims to clarify how the concepts are connected and vital in deciphering how these objects have been presented (See Appendix A, B, C & D).

Operationalisation of Main Concepts

For the purpose of ensuring clarity and cohesion throughout the paper, the main concepts of the study are defined and operationalized as follows:

Female Biblical Figures

This term refers to women mentioned in the scriptures of the Bible – both Old and New Testament. In the context of this study, these figures have been represented in visual arts in varying depictions. Specifically this study analyzes the contemporary narratives of artworks dealing with Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Judith and Esther whose artistic depictions stem from issues of gender and cultural influences (Nead, 1984; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1992).

Curatorial Strategies

This term circumvents the methods in which a museum utilizes to display artworks thoughtfully, selecting objects with intent, interpreting their representations and presenting works to museum goers mindfully. Curatorial strategies include designing an exhibition, writing and researching for curatorial narratives, labels and catalogs and educating viewers on historical contexts of an artwork whilst applying contemporary conversations (Macdonald, 2003; Kreps, 2003).

Patriarchal or Androcentric Lens

This term refers to a male-centric view on particular interpretations and depictions. Where history, culture, traditions and societal norms have been heavily shaped by the hands and eyes of men, this has caused the female population to become a marginalized group, often only seen as an accessory to a man's story. In the context of art, men have cemented the representations of these biblical women often depicting them in sensual manners, appealing to the gaze of a male-dominated society, perpetuating gender biases (Mulvey, 1975; Nead, 1984).

Contextualization

This is the process where museums provide historical, cultural and social background information to artworks through their curatorial texts. This allows viewers to understand objects better and provide greater insight beyond what meets the eye. In the context of female biblical figures, their visual depictions demote their identities unbeknownst to the viewer that they stand for greater significance and value (Karp & Lavine, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

Contemporary Lens

The term "contemporary lens" pertains to relating these century-old depictions to present day situations, specifically looking at feminist movements where there is an increasing call for sensitivity to matters that have been normalized in the past centuries. Where Susanna's beautified assault raised little

critique, such depictions are no longer permissible in contemporary cultural standards (Foster, 2011; Butler, 1990).

Sample and Units of Analysis

In selecting units of selection, this paper analyzed permanent collections and exhibitions that were centered on female biblical figures namely Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Judith and Esther. The following exhibitions were chosen as samples of analysis through their alignment with the study's objectives and their aim of bridging these centuries-old depictions of biblical figures with contemporary contexts and themes of gender and representation in visual arts.

The distinctive representations of Esther that diverge from other biblical women sparked curiosity. In analyzing the exhibition of the Jewish Museum, *The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt,* the museum had made this the central topic of their exhibition, giving an in-depth explanation of Esther's symbolism and reasons behind her representations.

The exhibition at the Palazzo Barberini *Caravaggio and Artemisia: Judith's Challenge – Violence and Seduction* was a striking contrast that differed from other exhibitions the paper has analyzed. This exhibition brings together various depictions of Judith from different artists, both male and female. This inclusion and spotlight over a female artist offered a compelling analysis and comparative angle for the study, which set it apart from other exhibitions that predominantly had depictions by male artists.

For the figure of Susanna, the Gouda Museum in the Netherlands was analyzed for their exhibition *Susanna – From the Middle Ages to #MeToo*. Gouda Museum's goal to bridge Susanna's story to contemporary issues of feminism immensely adhered to this study's research question, making its exhibition's analysis highly suitable for the aims of this research.

Lastly, the National Gallery of London was chosen due to its extensive permanent collection of Mary Magdalene artworks – the Gallery had even been featured in the BBC documentary *The Mystery of Magdalene* that famously explored her identity and the discourse around her sexualization and popular myth pertaining to her former life as a prostitute. Despite their participation in a documentary seeking to historically correct her identity, the Gallery remains impartial to the discourse and continues to allow varying depictions of her, even exhibiting the sensual *Repentant Magdalene* by Guido Cagnacci. This curatorial neutrality made the Gallery an enticing sample to analyze for this research.

Whilst analyzing these exhibitions, a few curators from these institutions were contacted to garner knowledge and insights regarding the curatorial choices and processes that goes on behind their permanent collections and exhibitions.

Data Collection

In total, 3 interviews were conducted in the span of 2 weeks. Where emails were sent to various curators and museum professionals in the week of April 30, while conducting the interviews from May 7 to May 14, 2025. The interviews were conducted in English, the native language of the participants and lasted for approximately 30 minutes each via Zoom platform. Despite researchers believing that face-to-face interviews produce a more thoughtful exchange and allows for more depth during the course of the interview (Opdenakker, 2006) in consideration of the participants' time, busy schedules and locations varying, online communication suited best for the purpose of the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the three semi-structured interviews together with the analysis of curatorial strategies by the 4 institutions that have displayed works of Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Judith and Esther, have been examined through a thematic analysis approach which made it possible to identify and interpret patterns with qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Exhibition texts and video tours explaining the exhibition were analyzed using semiotic theory to understand how language and presentation can shape interpretation. The language, words, concepts and ideas that are either emphasized or excluded directly affect how the narrative is perceived and influences the understanding of the public.

Through thoroughly analyzing the curatorial narratives of permanent collections and exhibitions depicting biblical figures, this formed the basis for interview questions where the results were examined to identify themes relating to institutional voice and ethical framing. This analysis highlights how museums have reinterpreted depictions in contemporary spaces through both visual and textual choices. The interviews played a crucial role in understanding the curator side in analyzing curatorial approaches, processes and writing narratives – reinforcing the importance in challenging historical representations of biblical women.

Results and Discussions

In this section, the researcher has analyzed four museums that contain a vast permanent collection of female Biblical figures or has executed exhibitions regarding a specific woman from the Bible; uncovering the strategies in how these institutions have reframed the narratives regarding sexualized depictions.

This section has been divided into three chapters where the women of the Bible have been depicted in varying forms. The first chapter on ***Conventional Depictions*** discusses how Esther's image is visibly different from other female biblical figures – more conservative, modest and chaste. The second chapter deals with ***Unnerving Portrayals that Challenging the Gaze***, where the case of Judith will be discussed. Lastly, the third chapter, ***Sexualized Portrayals*** where figures such as Mary Magdalene and Susanna have been eroticized to craft more intriguing visuals perhaps to cater to the male gaze.

This research paper has analyzed how these institutions have curated these women and uncover whether they have vindicated these portrayals from their complex histories.

Art historian Dr. Maddie Hewitson, who is organizing an event surrounding the topic of *Framing Religious Art in UK Collections,* explains how art themes and subjects resonate with certain occurrences of the time. These figures are mirror representations of what had currently been happening in society when these paintings were created. In the following chapters, the paper will reveal the hidden representations of biblical figures together with their biblical narratives and analyze how museums today shed light on these background stories rather than just focusing on the surface of the canvas.

CHAPTER I

Conventional Depictions

While sexualized portrayals of women were rampant across the fine arts, there have been depictions of certain figures that were noticeably exempted from this rule. Where Susanna and Mary Magdalene's images were based on narratives that focused on their sexual vulnerability or a test to their morality, Esther's representations built on her values and noble characteristics rather than her sexuality – making her an exception to this pattern. Esther's story that has traditionally been centered around empowerment, resilience and nationalism, has allowed artists to see her figure beyond just merely physical (Nead, 1992; Baskins, 2005) and allowed her representations to transcend to greater heights, being a prominent art subject in 17th century Dutch art, representing the liberation of the Netherlands from Spain (Israel, 1995; The Jewish Museum, 2025). The story of Esther being deeply embedded in Jewish culture and heritage plays a significant role to continuing traditions, which one can argue, had an effect to her more restrained and conservative portrayals as compared to other figures depicted in a more sexualized manner – a phenomenon more rampant in Christian iconography (Schroth, 2012; Baumgarten, 2003).

While Esther has been deeply respected and dignified through her portrayals, challenging the conventional visual tropes of the time, her visual representations today often neglect to bring to light the background reasons as to why these images were painted during those eras. Forgotten meanings and histories to her rich political symbolism is often overlooked in a contemporary space. Where viewers today may view her artworks and understand it to be purely decorative and its only purpose is seen to be solely aesthetically pleasing, without revealing the significance behind these works, is an injustice to her figure.

In this chapter, the researcher has analyzed the curatorial strategies made by the 2025 exhibition *The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt* in the Jewish Museum in New York City in bringing to light important aspects to the story and the depictions of Esther than purely its visual properties.

The Story of Esther

Among the final stories indicated in the Hebrew Bible, or more commonly known in Christian tradition as the "Old Testament", tells the story of a Jewish queen who saved her people from annihilation – this is the Book of Esther.

Esther, a Jewish woman who was orphaned at a very young age and as a result, was raised by her cousin, Mordecai. The story of Esther begins in 587 BCE, shortly after the Jewish people have been exiled by the Babylonian conquest, forcing them to vacate ancient Israel. The Books of Esther is set in the

city of Susa or Shushan, the capital of Persia – which is now present-day Shush, Iran – and mentions a powerful king, King Ahasuerus, the ruler of a vast empire spanning through 127 provinces, reaching from India to Nubia.

Through many nights of festivities and drunken celebrations, Vashti, the first wife of King Ahasuerus, refuses to appear before her husband and his guests, much to the king's dismay, he dismisses Vashti. Now in search of a new wife and queen, King Ahasuerus stages a royal beauty contest. Esther, who was known for her beauty and grace, wins the favor of the king and becomes the new queen. Despite being the new wife of King Ahasuerus, she decides to hide her Jewish identity in fear of being rejected by the king.

As the tale of Esther seems to be going smoothly, Mordecai comes into disagreement with the king's adviser, Haman, and refuses to bow to him, violating Jewish law. Enraged by his actions, Haman prepares a plan to kill all the Jewish people, urging King Ahasuerus to approve the decree and allow immediate action.

In a distressing moment filled with uncertainty and frustration, Esther is desperate to save her people and decides to reveal her Jewish identity to her husband, risking her life by confronting her husband uninvited. She pleads with her husband to attend two banquets, where in the second, she exposes the truth. King Ahasuerus is furious with Haman for threatening his wife and her people, ordering him to be executed on the gallows that he had built for the execution of Mordecai.

Despite the irrevocable decree already imposed by King Ahasuerus, Esther and Mordecai instead release a new decree permitting the Jewish people to defend themselves against the Persian army, successfully winning the battle.

Esther, a symbol of courage, faith and identity in Jewish tradition, marking the Purim celebration where her story is traditionally read annually for the holiday. Esther resonates heavily with freedom, which became symbolic for immigrant Jewish communities within the newly more tolerant Amsterdam in the early 1600s. The Netherlands, newly liberated from Spanish rule, depicted Queen Esther in their artworks to represent their growing national identity and independence as narrated in the 2025 exhibition *The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt* in the Jewish Museum in New York City (The Jewish Museum, 2025).

The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt, Jewish Museum New York

Through a conversation and lecture with Luigi de Benedetto, co-curator of the exhibition, he expressed how their accidental discovery led to the main focus on the exhibition, allowing viewers to explore a little known chapter in art history. While preparing for an exhibition surrounding Rembrandt's Esther, it had become distinctly noticeable how Esther's depictions varied from the contemporaries of the

time. Rembrandt painted Esther with a fuller, more rounded figure rather than representing her with the more common voluptuous features when depicting women. It had been discovered that Esther was modelled after an actress playing the role of Esther during the 17th century. Additionally, through research over her iconography, the curatorial team discovered how Esther's prominence during 17th century Dutch art was not solely based on aesthetic trends, rather, her story and image represents the Netherlands' triumphs at the time, highlighting their freedom for Spain, and putting an end to their struggle for independence during the Eighty Year's War which lasted from 1568-1648 – giving Esther and her image, greater significance.

Through the exhibition, we can observe that the curators acknowledge that the viewers of the exhibition may be from varying backgrounds and religions and due to this, the exhibition may need extra information highlighting who the figure is and why she is significant to some cultures. The Jewish Museum takes this into account and includes objects and narratives, such as the *Esther scroll* by Salom Italia (See Figure 1) that can highlight the significance around her figure and what she stands for in the Jewish holiday, Purim and is expounded on through their curatorial text (See Appendix A Figure 1).

Figure 1.1 Esther scroll by Salom Italia (1640)
Jewish Museum, New York

Through the curatorial narratives of Figure 2, the Jewish Museum presses importance on Esther's moral character and bravery to save her people. In this tactic, the museum uplifts the capabilities of a woman during those times and shows how, despite being painted in extravagant garments, she is not to be looked down on and her story is a symbol of great power in the hands of women which can be analyzed through the feminism theory. The curators have also used semiotics in identifying her figure inserting a modal adverb "*probably* Esther" whilst using cultural capital to assert a degree of expertise and certainty. The narrative also continues to back their claim while acknowledging signs such as the scroll that might have been the news regarding the fate of her people. We can also see that the curators have implied their own impressions by describing her image to be "fiercely determined" using their institutional voice to direct audiences to specific viewpoints (See Appendix A Figure 2).

Figure 1.2 The Great Jewish Bride (Probably Esther) by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669)
Morgan Library and Museum, New York

In several other narratives in the exhibition, the curators continue to uplift her womanhood by asking the audience to look beyond her extravagant garments and highlighting her strength through indicating "she wore this kind of royal attire when she interceded with Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jewish people" (See Appendix A Figure 3) in their curatorial narrative for the artwork *Esther* by Aert de Gelder (See Figure 3). The same manner of writing is seen through *Esther Reading the Royal Decree* by the Studio of Salomon Koninck (See Figure 4; Appendix A Figure 4).

Figure 1.3 Esther by Aert de Gelder (1665)
Private collection, London

Figure 1.4 Esther Reading the Royal Decree by the Studio of Salomon Koninck (1609–1656)
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh

In a conversation with Luigi de Benedetto, he acknowledges the disparity in her depictions with other biblical figures and through drawing attention to her clothes, the curators ask the viewers to notice this, creating leeway for thought of perhaps why Esther has been depicted to appear pure and resemble the madonna in the Madonna-Whore Theory.

Again, in *Esther before Ahasuerus* by Frans Francken the Younger Flemish (See Figure 5) the feminism and misogyny theory is seen through an excerpt of the text "as she could have been put to death for appearing before him uninvited" giving insight to the viewer of the misogyny that had occurred during this time and simultaneously giving a feminist view of Esther's strength and courage for the sake of saving her people (See Appendix A Figure 5).

Figure 1.5 Esther before Ahasuerus by Frans Francken the Younger Flemish (1622)
Collection of Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam

Figure 1.6 Haman Begging the Mercy of Esther by Pieter Lastman (1618-1619)
National Museum, Warsaw Poland

The inclusion of an unconventional depiction of Esther in the exhibition allows its viewers to witness a different side of her story – beyond the version for which she is most famously depicted. In this artwork by Pieter Lastman, the teacher of Rembrandt, he takes an unconventional route when depicting the Story of Esther. Taking a look at the title itself, one can already distinguish its departure from her more traditional representations. While Esther is typically painted as the one begging for the king's kindness and consideration, this depiction defies expectations – illustrating how Esther holds the power and it is a man who begs for her mercy (See Figure 6).

The story of Esther was heavily used during the Netherlands liberation from Spain, the Jewish Museum gives more context on their findings on this through explaining a few objects in the paintings that point connections to the Netherlands using semiotics – such as the pitcher, basin, box and fabric that are associated with Dutch homes seen in Figure 4. The same can be seen in Figure 7 & 8 which both contain references to Dutch life. Through these curatorial narratives, it has allowed Esther to go from a decorative art piece to an artwork that tells you a significant part of history (Appendix A Figure 3, Figure 7 & Figure 8).

Figure 1.7 The Toilette of Esther by Johannes van Noordt Dutch (1660)
Private collection, courtesy of the Hoogsteder Museum Foundation, the Hague

Figure 1.8 Woman Reading a Book by a Window by Gabriel Metsu Dutch (1653–54)
Leiden Collection, New York

Beyond assuring that viewers understand Esther's significance during the political tensions in Europe in the 17th century, the museum also highlights how Esther's heroic act is one that is not unique to the scriptures. By including a work that highlights another heroine (See Figure 8 & 9), this object selection widens the discussion of women's strength and achievements, symbolizing that her story continues to recur in contemporary times, just through different women, highlighting the feminism theory (See Appendix A, Figure 8 & 9).

Figure 1.9 Queen Esther/Harriet Tubman by Fred Wilson American (1992)
Jewish Museum, New York

Figure 1.10 Portrait of Harriet Tubman by Harvey B. Lindsley (1895–1910)
Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and Photographs Division

CHAPTER II

Unnerving Portrayals: Challenging the Gaze

Where sexualized portrayals were meant to satisfy the male gaze, in this chapter we identify subjects that have challenged the male gaze, appearing unsettling to some viewers. Traditionally, women are typically depicted as having a sweet demeanor, gentle movements and demure composition (Kachel, Steffens, & Niedlich, 2016). A number of scriptures from the Bible tell stories of women who did not entirely fit into this category. Women of the Bible were faced with several challenges of war, forcing these women to shift from what they were thought to be vulnerable and helpless, to strong and powerful (Yee, 1997). While sexuality – bare skin, overtly revealing garments, exposed breasts – have often been used by men to portray women as fragile and defenseless (Lennon & Johnson, 2016), it has historically been a woman's greatest weapon and man's biggest weakness – serving as a powerful instrument of agency and influence for women (Schwartz & Blair, 2020).

Despite these triumphant and empowering stories of women, male artists have often downplayed their depictions of such narratives, avoiding unsettling and graphic details in artworks that might have distraught viewers who are not accustomed to seeing women portrayed with such complexity and virility such as the depictions of Judith (Ashkenazy, n.d.).

The Story of Judith

The Book of Judith is told in the Old Testament of the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Judith is a beautiful and affluent widow from the Israelite town of Bethulia when the Assyrian army receives orders from King Nebuchadnezzar to attack her city. As the people of her city cry in despair and helplessness, Judith devises a plan to seduce Holofernes, the general of the Assyrian army.

As Judith pretends to retreat, she dresses herself with her finest clothes and becomes acquainted with Holofernes who is entranced by her beauty and charm. Gaining the favor of Holofernes, Judith manages to stay in his camp for several days, patiently waiting for the right moment she can carry out her plan.

After one drunken feast, Holofernes, drunk with alcohol, quickly falls asleep in his tent. Judith grabs his sword and beheads Holofernes as he lays unconscious. She then wraps his head with a cloth and brings his severed head back to the city of Bethulia causing the people to rejoice and garner the confidence to counterattack the now leaderless Assyrian army.

The story of Judith symbolizes female strength and courage in the midst of a patriarchal world. Where Judith, perhaps a helpless widow, puts a halt to the dominating Assyrian army showing great power when beauty and strength are placed together – making a deadly weapon (Palazzo Barberini, 2022).

The Story of Judith is widely depicted through the fine arts, evoking an image of a striking power from a woman which can either be interpreted as dangerously threatening or immensely empowering (Ashkenazy, n.d.).

The two contrasting traits have been seen through the various depictions of Judith, whereby Caravaggio's Judith portrays her facial expression as clueless and almost unwilling, only being coerced by someone less attractive, attempting to make it come across as an evil force – making this more digestible to stereotypical gender roles at the time. Whereas Artemisia Gentileschi portrays Judith with so much force and anger that it makes Judith's plan appear deliberate and calculated. Many scholars suggest that Judith's portrayal is heavily rooted in her own personal struggles with rape, and her projecting herself onto Judith, and her attacker on to Holofernes (Garrard, 1989).

Judith's image was heavily used In Florence during the late 15th century when a republican government was restored after the prominent Medici family fell out of power and were exiled from the city. The image of Judith and her story of triumph over tyranny was used to enforce republican ideals to the people of Florence. A statue of Judith and Holofernes by Donatello was placed in front of the Palazzo Vechio, the seat of government (de Bhailís, 2014); this move not only shows their government embodying strength, but also instilling fear by using Judith's wild story as a warning to those who oppose the new government (Proppe, 2014).

Caravaggio and Artemisia: Judith's challenge: Violence and seduction, Palazzo Barberini, Italy

In 2022, the Palazzo Barberini held an exhibition exploring the depictions of Judith throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. The exhibition highlighted how various artists of the Old Masters interpreted the story of Judith, in themes of violence, seduction and female empowerment.

Curator Maria Cristina Terzaghi divided the exhibitions through four different themes, the first section named ***Judith at the Crossroads between Style and Nature,*** focusing on the earliest depictions of Judith which highlighted realism and the intensity of her emotions featuring works by Pierfrancesco Foschi and Lavinia Fontana. The second section ***Caravaggio and His First Interpreters***, highlights Caravaggio's own depiction of Judith, which fashions chiaroscuro, an dramatic use of light and shadow – which became the baseline for many artists when depicting Judith. The third section ***Artemisia Gentileschi and the Theater of Judith*** highlights Artemisia's one of a kind interpretation of the biblical

figure, where she is able to capture the emotional depth of Judith, projecting her own struggles to the paintbrush onto the canvas. Lastly, the fourth section ***The Virtues of Judith: Judith and David, Judith and Salome*** explores the similarities between Judith and other biblical figures with comparable narratives such as David and Salome, emphasizing that Judith's story is not an isolated case, but sits in a broader narrative that ties through time, culture and artistic contexts.

In this exhibition, the Palazzo Barberini opened nuanced discussions on complex histories involving gender biases, power imbalances and the questioning of morality in art all through the lens of Judith (Palazzo Barberini, 2022; Giannini, 2022).

The exhibition of Judith pays a strong tribute to Artemisia Gentileschi where Artemisia used her art subjects as an avenue to release her personal frustrations. Judith served as a symbol of female agency and resilience, attributes Artemisia may have been struggling with in those times. Through the exhibition using the image of Judith whilst including several male artists to be on view together with Artemisia's, there is a strategic approach in uplifting a woman's artistry placing her on par – if not above – her male contemporaries which is seen through the texts of *Judith Beheading Holofernes* by Artemisia Gentileschi (See Figure 1) where the curators use a mix of semiotics through visually analyzing the artworks and the feminism theory in stating "Artemisia shows us here that she has learnt Caravaggio's lesson possibly better than anyone else." In this same narrative, the curators also find a way to give Artemisia a sense of resilience and tribute her works to her battle with sexual assault, uplifting her identity beyond her experiences (See Appendix B Figure 1).

Figure 2.1 Judith Beheading Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi (1612)

The exhibition encompasses more than just the image of Judith, but reaches for greater meaning by honoring Artemisia's craft and legend, merging two symbols of strength and resilience in a male-dominated space. She continues to be held in high regard as the exhibition mentions her through

their narratives of *Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* by Orazio Gentileschi (See Figure 2) and *Judith Handling the Head of Holofernes to her Maidservant* by Guido Cagnacci (See Figure 3) they note that her craft became a baseline for many artists in depicting Judith emphasizing the feminism theory (See Appendix B Figure 2 & Figure 3), where Pietro Novelli di Monrealese's Judith is described to be a "merging of Caravaggio and Artemisia" pressing great importance to woman's influence to another woman's depiction.

Figure 2.2 Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes by Orazio Gentileschi (1608-1609) The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo Norway

Figure 2.3 Judith Handling the Head of Holofernes to her Maidservant by Guido Cagnacci (1645) Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna Italy

The exhibition continues to make the effort to make necessary connections where artists might have been inspired through Artemisia's work. Guido Cagnacci's style as seen in Figure 3, was strongly attributed to Artemisia, proving high probability that he was indeed inspired by the artist upon seeing her

works in Rome (See Appendix B Figure 3). The exhibition also indicates artists such as Cristofano Allori have also found ways to channel himself into his craft in similar ways to Artemisia (See Figure 4) which is seen through the curatorial narrative of the "*David with the Head of Goliath"* (See Figure 4). Although, through analyzing the text, one may observe that there are a few areas lacking and might have been better to include additional information to appreciate the depiction to a higher degree. First, it can be noticed that they have seemed to make a mistake with regards to the title of the painting, it is posted in the text as "*David with the Head of Goliath"* whilst the narrative talks about Judith and Holofernes (See Appendix B Figure 4). The Uffizi Gallery, where the painting was borrowed from, also indicates that the title of the artwork is indeed *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (Le Gallerie degli Uffizi, 2025).

*Figure 2.4 *Judith with the Head of Holofernes by Cristofano Allori (1610-1612)*
Gallerie degli Uffizi, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Firenze Italy

The narrative also seems to leave out important information such as the original painting by Allori is part of the Royal Collection Trust located in the Picture Gallery of Buckingham Palace – this would have been vital in referencing the background of the work. The original work also details Allori's mistress in its cushion which would have been worth noting in this narrative relating the identity of Mezzafirra to Judith in better understanding how their personas intertwine (See Figure 5).[1] Another critique would be how the narrative does not discuss visual attributes of Judith or Mezzafirra who is depicted in a very beautiful, sultry 17th century way but has that controversial element of her power in seducing Holofernes. This has been mentioned in the curatorial texts of both the Uffizi Gallery and in the Royal Collections, especially referring to smooth complexion and skin tone (Le Gallerie degli Uffizi, 2025; Royal Collection Trust, 2025).

[1] *The Royal Collection Trust* includes an inscription linking himself to Holofernes. See Royal Collection Trust (2025)

Figure 2.5 Judith with the Head of Holofernes by Cristofano Allori (1577-1621)
Picture Gallery, Buckingham Palace United Kingdom

The exhibition makes several inferences based on semiotics to expound on the depictions. In the painting *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* by Artemisia Gentileschi (See Figure 6) it indicates "several scholars have seen a self-portrait of the artist in Judith's features" and through this, a semiotic language is applied continuing by adding "psychology" from making-meaning from signs and symbols evident in the artwork (See Appendix B Figure 6). While in *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* by Orazio Gentileschi (See Figure 7), the curators make tedious observations by stating in the narrative that the figures have been "interrupted by a sound that causes only the maidservant Abra to turn around. The two women carry the pannier together but the direction of their guns and their bodies sets them apart" which details how the viewers can visualize the sounds that were occurring – emphasizing the loud, chaotic and dangerous atmosphere which in turn highlights the strength of the female figures (See Appendix B Figure 7).

Figure 2.6 Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi (1615) Gallerie degli Uffizi, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Firenze Italy

Figure 2.7 Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes by Orazio Gentileschi (1621-1624) Wadworth Atheneum Museum of Art CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, Hartford Connecticut

CHAPTER III

Sexualized Portrayals

Amid an enduring male-centric worldview, the male gaze became the basis for art trends and standards, transforming women into eroticized subjects to fulfill style trends and the demand for captivating images in narratives about gender and virtue (Mulvey, 1975; Pollock, 1988). Mary Magdalene and Susanna became figures who represented the evident anxieties behind female sexuality, morality and imposed control through the system of patriarchy that dictated the trajectory of the art world (Nochlin, 1971; Berger, 1972).

The Story of Susanna and the Elders

The story of Susanna can be found in the Book of Daniel chapter 13 in the Old Testament of the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles. Susanna is the wife of Joakim of Babylon, a wealthy man. Susanna herself is described as so beautiful that she catches the unwanted attention of two elder judges, who watch her in secret with lustful eyes.

One day, the two elders find themselves hiding and watching Susanna as she bathes peacefully in the premises of her own garden. As Susanna's maids leave her, the two elders suddenly come out of hiding, coercing young Susanna to have sexual intercourse with them, warning her that if she were to refuse, they threaten to falsely accuse her of cheating on her husband with a young man in the garden. Despite Susanna's fear and being constrained into a difficult situation, she remains faithful to both her husband and the Lord by saying "I would rather fall into your hands than sin in the sight of the Lord."

Outraged by Susanna's unwillingness to comply, the elders accuse her of adultery and she is forced into trial where she is faced with the punishment of death.

The prophet Daniel who had been called by the Holy Spirit intervenes quickly in hopes of saving the young Susanna from execution. He questions the elders separately, asking which tree had the act taken place in, to which they both gave a different answer. The discrepancies in their statements exposed the truth and led the two elders to be put to death, vindicating Susanna.

Susanna, who is a symbol of faith and virtue, has been subject to eroticism throughout the centuries, depicting her as a willing participant to her own abuse. This troubling aspect in art history – beautifying sexual assault and the silencing of women, is the central theme surrounding the *Susanna – From Middles Ages to #MeToo* exhibition in the Gouda Museum located in the Netherlands, where the

curators have aimed to highlight how this centuries-old story still remains deeply relevant to contemporary issues.

Susanna, similar to Mary Magdalene, her story supports the motives of the Counter-Reformation, calling Catholics to resist – just how Susanna resisted. Susanna was also seen as an excuse for artists to paint the female nude – some artists would even use young, lower class females such as servants to pose nude, which was not a socially accepted practice at the time (Sorabella, 2008) this is briefly mentioned in a curatorial narrative in the Susanna exhibition discussing how Caravaggio practiced his craft by using live models.

Susanna – From Middles Ages to #MeToo, Gouda Museum, Netherlands

In 2017, the #MeToo movement gained widespread attention and support after Hollywood actress, Alyssa Milano, tweeted on social media platform Twitter "if you've been sexually harassed or assaulted, write 'me too' as a reply." This pertained to the various sexual abuse allegations made against Hollywood producer, Harvey Weinstein. The origins of the term "#MeToo" can be traced back to 2006 when Tarana Burke used this tagline to support sexual violence survivors, emphasizing the idea that they are not alone and there is no shame in speaking up about their abusers (Boyle, 2019 & Boyle, 2019).

With the #MeToo movement garnering worldwide attention, it changed the trajectory of feminism and the culture around victim-silencing (Boyle, 2019 & Boyle, 2019). The events that have unfolded and stories that finally came to light were not issues unique to the present era – these issues have been echoing through the walls for centuries, sitting comfortably as they have been framed, admired and romanticized without question.

In 2022, the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, Germany curated the *Susanna – From Middle Ages to #MeToo* exhibition, applying current feminist movements to empower and shed light on a centuries-old problematic reverence. Due to the exhibition's wide success in sparking deeper conversations about gender biases in art, a second exhibition was done in Gouda Museum in the Netherlands where several images of Susanna, spanning various periods were showcased from sketches by Rembrandt to extravagant artworks such as Artemisia Gentilischi's famous *Susanna* as the centerpiece – implying strong relations to Artemisia's personal struggle with rape and her similar narrative to her subject.

The museum even explored how Susanna's assault is found hiding in plain sight throughout popular culture. In the 1960 movie *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock, the main character, a serial killer plotting to murder a woman, is seen in the movie peeking through a hole in the wall which is covered by a 1714

painting *Susanna and the Elders* by Willem van Mieris. Susanna's assault has been immensely accustomed to society that it has been glorified through generations and used to intensify plotlines.

In a wall text entitled ***Susanna as a Trope,*** the museum details how Susanna and the elders is a famous storyline depicted by many artists across the arts. Her story and depiction have been reinterpreted and adjusted countless times over the centuries to fit the societal values, trends in art, gender norms and issues that relate to current events of the time. While the original story of Susanna in the scriptures uphold her for her faith in God and her choice to remain loyal to her husband despite the traumatic ordeal that she had to endure, many artistic depictions press focus on her most vulnerable moments, at the height of her assault, often aestheticizing a scene that involves sexual aggression and presenting it in a visually pleasing manner, blurring the line between abuse and beauty.

The image of Susanna and her perpetrators have been altered to fit society's perception of good and evil. In a text by the Gouda Museum they indicate "some portrayals of Susanna have an even darker edge. This story is set in a Jewish community in today's Middle East, but artists usually depict Susanna according to the prevailing Western European ideal of beauty. However, the elders are often portrayed as men with caricatured features that have become archetypal for a Jewish appearance. The wicked Jewish elders attacking the innocent Susanna is an unadulterated example of antisemitism, which reached its peak in the early 20th century" (Gouda Museum, 2024).

Feminism does not solely apply to women, but also men who have been affected by biases that position them in a contrasting sphere such as seen in this curatorial text where the woman is made to be the idealized subject. In this narrative it is interestingly seen to be intertwined with race which the museum addresses seemingly through their following sentence. Through this text, the curators transition from a visual representation to branching to socially experienced issues. The curators also use their cultural capital in highlighting broader issues such as antisemitism and have identified this through the use of semiotics.

To make a more intriguing storyline, artists have added several elements to beautify their paintings, veering away from its original narrative. The exhibition explains how Susanna's story has become increasingly romanticized and decorated and uses semiotics to gather this hypothesis, comparing her vulnerability to an added element: a blue and white Kraak porcelain bowl from China 1585-1600 as seen in Figure 1 (See Appendix C Figure 1).

Figure 3.1 Susanna and the elders by Joachim Wtewael (1611-1614)

Museum Gouda, Gouda Netherlands

This use of Susanna's story stems from more than just an act of violence towards women, but represents racism through the years. The museum puts forward images that have been long overlooked and unnoticed with antisemitism hiding in plain sight. Viewers have been so accustomed to altering features of characters deemed good and evil where broader issues behind this notion have been neglected.

Through one of the most disturbing depictions of Susanna in the exhibition (See Figure 2), the Gouda Museum presents this image to highlight broader inequalities in geo-political standpoints and the Nazi regime banning some of these works. Through the narrative of the figure below, we can see that the curators have seemingly added their own thoughts by adding the adjective "shocking" whilst describing the artwork. This adds a level of seriousness that the curators want to put across to their audience, using their authority as an institution in raising a level of concern to this racist account (See Appendix C Figure 2).

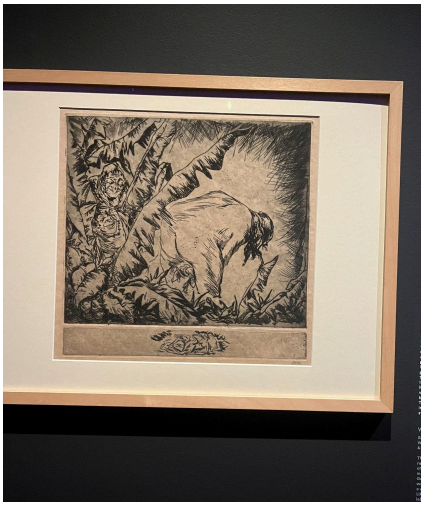

Figure 3.2 Susanna bathing by Willi Geiger (1920)
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Foundation Corboud, Cologne

In depictions of Susanna, such as the artwork in Figure 3, her appearance differs from the Elders despite all three characters to be of Jewish background, residing in the Middle East. The Elders were found to have big noses, thick lips and drawn in a caricature-like manner to emphasize their immoral disposition. As for Susanna, she is portrayed as having Western features such as her porcelain skin when historically, as a woman from her region, she should have a darker complexion. The contrast of their physical attributes highlights antisemitism and prevailing racism which has been explained through the exhibition's curatorial texts and highlight areas such as her reaction and the elders' hand placement in amplifying unease in this depiction. The curators also use their institutional voice by guiding the audience on the point of discussion (See Appendix C Figure 3).

Figure 3.3 Susanna Bathing by Hans Meid (1912),
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Foundation Corboud, Cologne

The tonality used by the curators is careful and calculated, in the artwork *Susanna bathing* by Arnold Böcklin (See Figure 4) they use simple words such as “evident” and “stereotypically” that lewd audiences into obvious problematic discourses, inviting further contemplation. The curators also assert prominence to the work by mentioning that this artist was Hitler’s favorite which in turn, presses on just how intense it is – in this form, it can be observed how curators shifted their cultural capital to another figure by mentioning Hitler. In this way, Bocklin’s significance and reference to racism in his artwork is heightened (See Appendix C Figure 4).

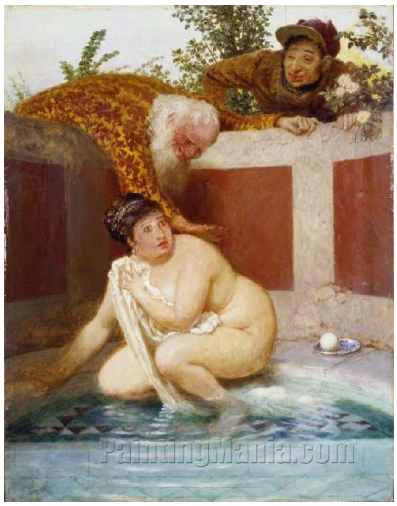

Figure 3.4 Susanna bathing by Arnold Böcklin (1888),
Landesmuseum für Kunst & Kulturgeschichte, Oldenburg

The exhibition has chosen to include objects that were not rampant depictions of Susanna in order to shed light on a larger narrative, rather than just her abuse – as seen in Figure 5. The exhibition even highlights how these depictions were unusual for Susanna stating “the moment when Susanna is assailed by the elders is the most popular with artists” but the inclusion of other representations of her shows how the museum recognizes the relevance in presenting a balanced narrative. This tactic allows viewers to see her story from various lenses where the Gouda Museum chose to present images of Susanna’s vindication and her triumph over evil, highlighting her virtue and faith in God (See Appendix C Figure 5).

Figure 3.5 A series of works narrating the story of Susanna
by Crispijn van de Passe, after Maerten de Vos (1574-1637)

In Figure 6, this selection addressed how not everyone turned a blind eye to the violation of her imagery. Her portrayals were so explicit that it had been banned by the Catholic Church – showing not only two sides of Susanna but the divergence of stances through the centuries in her misappropriated imagery. The curators have added their own voice in stating the phrase "notorious example" when describing the object. This allows audiences to view it through the eyes of the curators, emphasizing how erroneous of a depiction it was (See Appendix C Figure 6).

Figure 3.6 Susanna and the elders by Agostino Carracci (1590-1595)
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam Netherlands

Through curatorial narratives, the exhibition angled it to benefit Susanna, asking the viewers to feel sympathy rather than eroticism in describing Figure 7 stating “as a viewer, you are drawn into the scene and sympathise with the shame and despair that overwhelm Susanna” as what it had been intended to evoke to its audiences for centuries. Reframing the interpretation and leading the audience to this direction as well. This can be interpreted as using their cultural capital to influence a feminist stance through evoking emotion from semiotics (See Appendix C Figure 7).

Figure 3.7 Susanna and the elders by Rembrandt van Rijn (1650-1655)
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam Netherlands

The exhibition expressed connections of how Susanna’s sexualized image continues to penetrate into today’s society. In bridging connections, it has allowed viewers to recognize the importance of why narratives need to be recontextualized and further discussed. The misuse of her story has become a form of entertainment which in ways, dishonors women’s stories of sexual abuse that continuously corresponds to contemporary issues. In Figure 8, it shows an unnamed woman getting undressed but the curators have used semiotics in identifying this as Susanna through a well-known painting of Susanna by Rubens in the background (See Appendix C Figure 9).

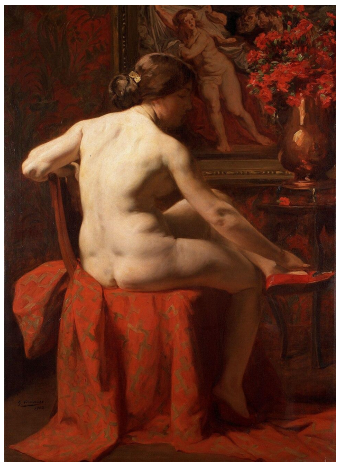

Figure 3.8 After the bath by Gustave Vanaise (1902)

Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent Belgium

In Figure 9, we can see a closer look at the Rubens painting that has been depicted in the background of Figure 8. This painting was not included in the exhibition but was mentioned thoughtfully through the curatorial narrative (See Appendix C Figure 9).

Figure 3.9 Susanna and the Elders by Peter Paul Rubens (1607)

Galleria Borghese, Rome Italy

Another reference to Susanna can be seen in the thriller film, *Psycho* where similarly to the story of Susanna and the Elders, Norman Bates spies on his victim as she takes a bath (See Figure 10). The painting is the only thing standing between the viewer and the vulnerable woman, echoing the same storyline of Susanna, invading her privacy and the female body in the midst of objectification and lust by a male. The curators strongly use various theories in their narrative, using semiotics, misogyny,

madonna-whore complex and the theory of the male gaze to explain this scene, branding her as the "ultimate sex symbol" (See Appendix C Figure 10).

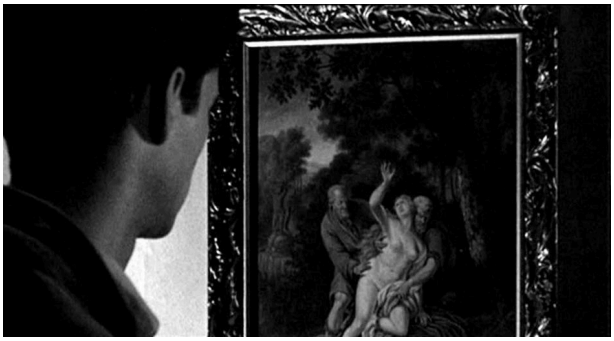

Figure 3.10 Scenes from the film Psycho by Alfred Hitchcock (1960)

Universal Pictures

Figure 11 is a closer look at the painting featured in the movie *Psycho* but was not included in the exhibition. The artwork visibly shows Susanna in the midst of despair as the elders harass and violate her womanhood.

Figure 3.11 Susanna and the elders by Willem van Mieris (1714)

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels Belgium

Susanna's depictions continue even on X-rated magazine illustrations (See Figure 12). Susanna is drawn as a cartoon for the cover of a Parisian Playboy magazine, beautifying her assault with the intent to interest and arouse buyers and readers reinforcing the male gaze theory strongly and is represented in the

curatorial narrative stating “two ‘future elders’ peep from behind a window” highlighting how Susanna’s depiction is meant to entice the male perspective (see Appendix C Figure 12).

Figure 3.12 Susanna and the future elders from Le Sourire, Parisian Art Deco Playboy (April issue 1922) Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Foundation Corboud, Cologne

The Gouda exhibition highlighted how Susanna’s depictions were not only for the purpose of the male gaze, but rather, stood for greater significance during specific time periods. As the story of Susanna tells of a God-fearing woman with unwavering faith, withstanding to comply despite immense pressure, this theme strongly resonated with the rising threat of the Protestant Reformation – with the Catholic Church urging their people to resist just as Susanna resisted, as depicted in Figure 13. The narrative of this work highly uplifts the story of Susanna in a feminist stance stating “Susanna was a role model for the Catholic Church” and continues to state “a Catholic heroine whose faith remains unbowed despite her impossible situation” (See Appendix C Figure 13).

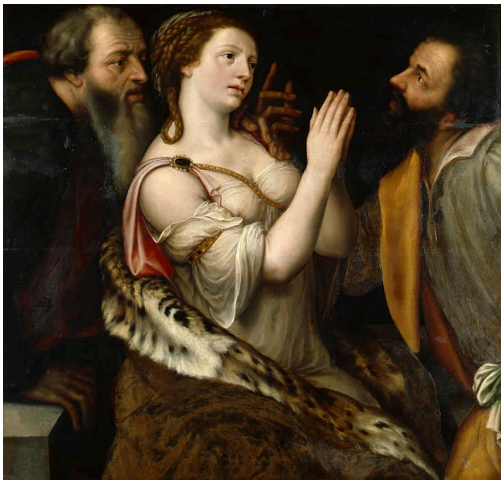

Figure 3.13 Susanna and the two elders by Michiel Coxie (1550-1559)

Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe

This narrative draws an interesting insight on how they have crafted the text to vary from other portrayals where Susanna is depicted as the *whore,* yet here as the curators state "just as Susanna had resisted" this paints her as the *madonna*. This is an interesting note where her portrayal is dependent on what her purpose serves. If it is to entice, she is sensuous but if she is to influence, she is resilient – the same can be seen through Magdalene's depictions.

The centerpiece of the exhibition, *Susanna and the elders* by Artemisia Gentileschi (See Figure 14) gave the image of Susanna a greater meaning by representing her artist in ways Artemisia could not express herself. Where Artemisia struggled with accusing her rapist of the violent act done towards her, Artemisia poured her frustration onto her canvas, channeling herself in characters such as Susanna. The curators evidently take a feminist stance through highlighting how unconventional a depiction of this nature was made by a female "while women artists usually limited themselves to portraits and still lifes, she applied her abundant talents to ambitious religious history paintings." They also make an interesting remark through the use of semiotics when stating that it was unusual for women to depict this subject yet what stands out about Artemisia's work is she "chooses for the elders to not touch Susanna. The integrity of her body remains intact." By using this as a centerpiece, it makes Susanna a pillar of strength to women that have experienced similar situations, highlighting an ultimate #MeToo moment in history (See Appendix C Figure 14).

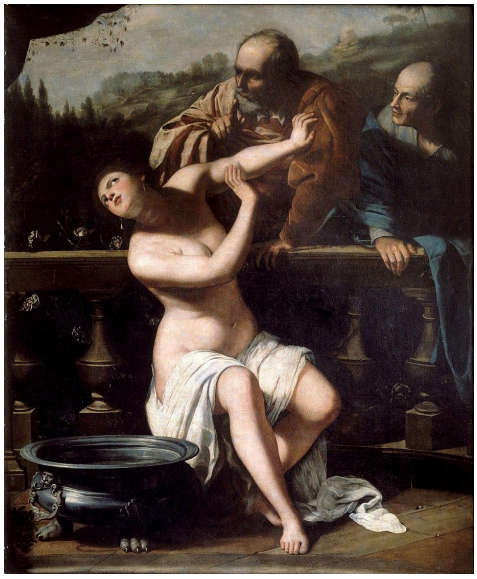

Figure 3.14 Susanna and the elders by Artemisia Gentileschi (1649)
Moravian Gallery, Brno Czech Republic

The Story of Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene, the widely regarded biblical figure as the female companion of Jesus Christ who has traditionally been depicted as a penitent prostitute, whose iconography in fine arts often depicts her in red garments, long flowing hair, exposed breasts and a sorrowful deposition (Shore, 2021). This portrayal of Mary Magdalene stems from a homily conducted by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century stating "...and what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously sued the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts" (Pope Gregory the Great, Homily XXXIII, 591). The *seven devils* pertain to the biblical passages of Luke and Mark, that tells of a certain *Mary* who had been healed from seven demons – which has been understood as a euphemism in modern times, translating to a woman's sinful deeds, more specifically sexual desires. The author Schaberg writes:

> "Here is the great imaginative opportunity: what kind of demons would a woman have? Sexual, of course. And seven, indicating intensity, totality, voracious lust. Her demon-possession is variously interpreted today as epilepsy or mental illness, an obsession or addiction, a not understood compulsion, a binding by the spirits of unfreedom, a sign of the lack of the Holy Spirit" (Schaberg, 2022).

Mary Magdalene's identity is now thought to have been mistakenly merged with three different Mary's in the Bible. The first Mary is derived from Luke 7:36-50 who had interrupted the feast at the home of Simon the Pharisee, using her tears, hair and perfume to wash Jesus' feet. The second Mary is Mary of Bethany who appears in several books in the Bible. Luke 10:38-42 identifies her as the sister of Martha and Lazarus. John 11:1-45 describes how Mary of Bethany witnesses the resurrection of her brother, Lazarus, and in Matthew 26:6-12; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8, anointed Christ. Lastly, the Bible writes about Mary of Magdala "from whom seven demons had gone out" as described in Luke 8:2. All four gospels in the Bible, Matthew 27:55-56, Mark 15:40-41, Luke 23:49 and John 19:25, tell accounts of Mary of Magdala witnessing the crucifixion while in Matthew 27:61, Mark 15:47 and Luke 23:55 reads the story of her witnessing the entombment; and finally, perhaps the most significant, in Matthew 27:61, Mark 15:47 and Luke 23:55 declares Mary of Magdala the first person to see the risen Jesus Christ three days after his death (Leïchlé, 2018).

Aside from Mary Magdalene's shifting image throughout the Counter-Reformation and Baroque, the emergence of Mary Magdalene's depictions as a sex worker rose in Venice, Italy during the 16th century due to the surge of sexually transmitted diseases. Mary Magdalene's image became a forewarning to society at that time and in turn, cemented recurring patterns in her sexualized depictions (Lupieri, 2019).

Mary Magdalene in the National Gallery London

Traditionally, Anglo-American labels and curatorial narratives have aimed to contextualize the artworks they display within historical, social and political discourse with emerging themes in gender, power and representation which in turn has caused museums to become more critical and inclusive in their curatorial practices. This practice has urged museums to develop their collections to align with modern-day feminist movements, actively re-evaluating their collections and incorporating diverse perspectives (Phillips, 2011; McClellan, 2008). In Anglo-American contexts where institutions are predominantly secular, museum texts tend to lean more towards critiquing religious interpretations and exploring contemporary re-readings of depictions of female biblical figures (Duncan, 1995; Preziosi & Farago, 2004).

Looking into the National Gallery London website, the general description of Mary Magdalene describes her as a character who:

> "...was cured of seven devils by Christ and became his follower (Luke 8: 2). She was present at the Crucifixion, and was the first person to whom the resurrected Christ revealed himself (with the words 'Touch me not', in Latin 'Noli me Tangere').
>
> She is often held to be the same person as Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha. She is characterised as the penitent whore and as a paragon of contemplation. Her attribute is the pot of ointment with which she anointed Christ's feet, as is told in the Gospels. She is usually shown wearing red."

Through this text, it can be observed that the National Gallery of London frames the identity of Mary Magdalene not as a fact, claiming her background, but rather as a way to understand why she might have been depicted in certain ways – giving greater understanding to her iconography yet remaining at a stance of neutrality towards a much debated subject. The use of semiotics and cultural capital is evident in the text, where they have used the phrase "she is characterised as…" when discussing her iconography which imposes an adherence to art history rather than a biblical discourse.

In an interview with Susanna Avery-Quash, she expressed the Gallery's effort to remain impartial as a secular institution yet still informative. Susanna recognizes the demand for cultural sensitivity and because of this, the Gallery holds sensitivity meetings for every exhibition they organize, inviting several professionals of different backgrounds to comment and give insights, highlighting issues that may arise that the curatorial team may have overlooked.

In an interview with a former fellow of the Nation Gallery London who has become a curator for the museum, she expressed how due to the museum's 200th anniversary in 2025, the museum has undergone a major rehang with an emphasis on reinterpretation of their permanent collections. The interviewee together with the curators of the museum, had updated the curatorial narratives of several artworks, including those of Mary Magdalene where the museum holds a substantial quantity of artworks depicting her. Most of these curatorial narratives had been written decades prior, some spanning 30 years over, needing a serious revamp to align to today's standards. She expressed their mission to address these images with greater awareness and adhering to an account that closely resembles art historical narratives rather than just strictly biblical – why were these images painted in this manner? What were the beliefs during those times? Specifically delving into the case around Mary Magdalene where there was a prominent understanding and belief that her identity was understood to be a penitent prostitute – a much debated topic in more recent years – which gives insight to why there are several sexual depictions of the saint that can be seen through many museums today.

In this section we identify the curatorial narratives used to express art forms of Mary Magdalene depicted in her usual iconography that vary from red garments, long flowing hair, exposed breasts and skin, a sorrowful disposition and sometimes set in the wilderness with books – representing the belief of her seclusion and meditation in France after the death of Christ (Shore, 2021). In Figure 1, it is a close representation of her usual depictions, apart from the artist depicting her in blue rather than red. The curators have used semiotics to identify her identity in their narrative. They also back their use of semiotics by adding the phrase "according to legend" which justifies her sexual depiction to be associated with a myth that has not been proven factual – an indication that these iconographies are artistic attributes only. The Gallery has used their cultural capital in influencing the audience regarding an ongoing debate surrounding her identity (See Appendix D Figure 1). This is further continues through other texts in the Gallery such as *Saint Mary Magdalene* by Guido Reni (See Figure 2) stating "Mary Magdalene was later identified with another biblical figure, an unnamed woman understood to be a repentant prostitute – an identification which is almost certainly untrue" (See Appendix D Figure 2) and is again repeated in *Saint Mary Magdalene borne by Angels* by Giulio Romano and Gianfrecesco Penni (See Figure 3) stating "who according to medieval legend was a penitent prostitute" (See Appendix D Figure 3). The effort of the curators in correcting historical biases and informing audiences about her contested history is evident and constant through all their narratives of Mary Magdalene.

Figure 4.1 The Magdalen by Correggio (1518-1519)
National Gallery London

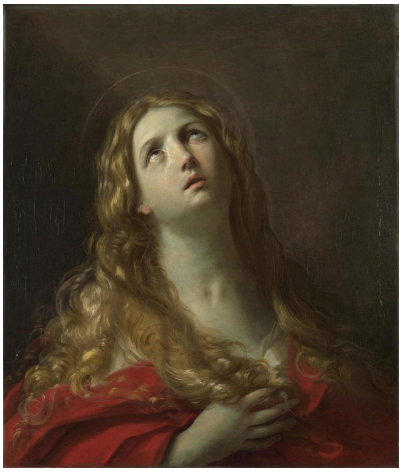

Figure 4.2 Saint Mary Magdalene by Guido Reni (1575-1642)
National Gallery London

Figure 4.3 Saint Mary Magdalene borne by Angels
by Giulio Romano and Gianfrecesco Penni (1520-1)
National Gallery London

Figure 4.4 Mary Magdalene by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo (1535-1540)
National Gallery London

In all the curatorial texts, the Gallery has made it a point to include the much debated myth in an effort to keep their narratives up to date and allow for curiosity to its readers by educating them regarding contemporary topics and ongoing research findings. As said by a former fellow of the Gallery, they leave room for curiosity where visitors of the Gallery may grow interested to explore and investigate on their own, inviting further thought by making use of open-ended statements. This tactic is also a great way in ensuring the curatorial text is limited to only a substantial amount of words for viewers to understand the image enough.

Despite the National Gallery London taking part in the BBC documentary *The Mystery of Magdalene* (Bragg, 2013), the museum does not ignore the fact that, while many scholars challenge the accuracy of Mary Magdalene's identity of being a prostitute, the persistence of this centuries-old – probably the oldest known – myth proves that determining a definite truth is nearly impossible to trace – whether it be from her actual existence or her identity.

Through this, the museum takes an impartial stance by showcasing both sides of the story of Magdalene and the ways she has been depicted through the centuries. In 2017, the National Gallery organized the exhibition for *Guido Cagnacci's Repentant Magdalene* (See Figure 5) collaborating with the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California in this extraordinary loan. Aside from the *Repentant Magdalene*, there is only one authenticated work by Guido Cagnacci within the United Kingdom, making the loan substantially important. It had been the first time the National Gallery London ever had a work of Guido Cagnacci hung on their walls and this work in particular, despite the majority of its provenance residing in the United Kingdom, it had been the first time to be open for display to the public.

The *Repentant Magdalene* features Mary Magdalene laying on a tiled floor, wearing nearly nothing except for a white cloth draped solely around her waist, exposing both the upper and lower half of her body. Her hands are painted clasping on to a golden necklace in a similar manner to how traditional paintings of saints would clasp a rosary, emphasizing her repentance to vices and renouncing all luxuries. The *Repentant Magdalene* was an untraditional depiction of Mary Magdalene, with only an ointment jar seen behind her figure being the only traditional iconography included in the painting that is associated with Mary Magdalene. It had been considered as Guido Cagnacci's most sensual work to which the great art historian, Francis Haskell describes the manner of which the painting depicts Mary Magdalene as "sophisticated perversion." It was so erotic for its time that even Guido Cagnacci signed the work on the bottom right as "inventor" indicating that it is an original composition, signifying that the artist himself understands it is a very unconventional depiction (National Gallery London, 2017).

Figure 4.5 The Repentant Magdalene by Guido Cagnacci (1660)

Norton Simon Museum Pasadena, California

Despite the BBC documentary that had previously taken place within the museum, the National Gallery London dares to show a problematic yet a historical reality of how Mary Magdalene had been depicted through an ideology at the time and how that belief system birthed her visual representations.

Francesca Whitlum-Cooper, the curator responsible for the exhibition of the *Repentant Magdalene*, angles the institution's view on the painting much closer to the virtue of Mary Magdalene. In an introductory video tour of the exhibition, Francesca Whitlum-Cooper presses emphasis on how Mary Magdalene's repentance is very passionate and less on how she is sexualized. She gives a background on

how it was a very erotic painting but less closely associating this to Mary and more on the controversial background of the artist – this direction makes the character less objectified shifting questions from "why is Mary Magdalene that way?" to "why was Mary Magdalene *painted* that way?" adjusting the focus from blaming her womanhood in her depiction and instead looking at perhaps the reason why the artist intended to depict her in that manner. Despite the inability to find the curatorial narrative of this artwork online, the museum has posted a video explaining the artwork with great depth, online.

Whilst the debate surrounding #MuseumsAreNotNeutral, this study finds importance to maintaining a certain level of neutrality with contested figures such as Mary Magdalene where there is no definite finding to her identity – nor may there ever be. Her identity will always be interpreted and digested differently, it is vital to leave room for one or the other.

In an undisclosed interview with one of the curators of the National Gallery London, it has been revealed that there are ongoing plans for an exhibition of Mary Magdalene in the National Gallery London, with the centerpiece of the exhibition being *Mary Magdalene* by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo for its unique depiction of Magdalene – unusually covered in garments, painting her in silver rather than the famous blood red, and less emphasis on neither her penitence or sensuality (See Figure 4). While the direction and area of focus is still under discussion, the curator notes that the museum intends to adhere to art historical narratives rather than strictly biblical. She has also expressed how it is being discussed whether one of the central elements to this exhibition could be the history surrounding how her sexualized images became so rampant, through the surge of sexually transmitted diseases in Venice – to understand the provenance of her strong visual signifiers in art history. This inclusion to the exhibition would give greater context and historical background to the development of her iconography through time.

Conclusions

This study has explored how museums today address female biblical figures whose representation has been heavily shaped by underlying complex histories and oftentimes through a patriarchal lens. Through the analysis of several institutions dealing with the iconographies of Esther, Judith, Susanna and Mary Magdalene, this study concludes the ways in which these institutions have reframed and uplifted the narratives of these women.

Recurring themes across these institutions stand out in their effort to contextualize and reframe these biblical figures:

The ***process of selecting objects*** for display has become increasingly intentional and purposeful. In Gouda Museum's exhibition for Susanna, they had included depictions of her spanning through several decades, even including her appearance in popular culture creating a timeline of an enduring disrespect and beautification towards sexual assault. Where Susanna's image had been chosen to represent the cover of a Parisian Playboy magazine, emphasizing how her story is perceived as thrilling enough to arouse readers rather than disturb.

The Mary Magdalene artworks chosen by the National Gallery of London included both sensual and conservative depictions of her – implying that despite her contested sexual depictions, the Gallery has no intent on erasing history, but rather showcasing them for generations to witness and get a better grasp on the gender biases that had occurred through the centuries. This tactic chooses to remain impartial to discourses, avoiding to control a narrative and obscuring viewers from a one-sided perception and instead offering a truthful two-sides-of-the-story. Choosing not to display does not remove the fact that it has happened.

Museums are taking greater care in ***addressing objects with sensitive material and contested histories***. There has been more effort to represent different depictions in respect to cultures and traditions. In the exhibition of Susanna, the Gouda Museum addressed the varying features of Susanna and the two elders, where Susanna is depicted in Western features in an attempt to make her appear more innocent and ideal whilst the the elders were depicted to have Jewish features and caricature-like – an antisemitism tactic intended to portray the elders appear more "evil". Although historically, this story is set in a Jewish community in today's Middle East. The exhibition gave greater emphasis to this detail by adding historical data of how some of these works were banned in Germany as these were labelled as *Entartete Kunst* which translates to Degenerate Art by the Nazi regime.

Through ***highlighting the identity of the artists and their subject***, this allows for more understanding to how these depictions were crafted based on intentions and societal influences imposed on the artists themselves, and in turn, to their crafts. In the exhibition of Palazzo Barberini for Judith, they made meaningful connections to Artemisia's portrayal where she projects herself on to Judith due to her personal struggles in rape, revealing how the artist herself had been subjected to an unfair system of gender biases and power imbalances imposed by patriarchy.

Beyond merely just displaying art for an interesting curatorship, institutions have delved into research, analyzing layered narratives and interdisciplinary connections that permit greater public understanding of these images ***adding greater meaning*** to these images. In the depictions of Esther, where through visual analysis, may be superficially perceived as a visually pleasing work of art, the Jewish Museum has contextualized her depictions to greater heights and shedding light to a lesser known chapter in art history where her depictions represented a greater socio cultural sphere, highlighting political imbalances at the time. The Jewish Museum has made it a point to educate viewers that Esther was a prevalent art subject during 17th century Dutch art for her identity as a powerful queen that freed the Jewish people from exile, resonating deeply with the Netherlands liberation from an 80 year power struggle with Spain. In revealing this aspect, it gives Esther's image a significant symbolism to nationalism rather than just a visually pleasing artwork.

Together, these strategies have forged meaningful connections from depictions and created a more purposeful atmosphere, opening discussions and evoking a greater responsibility to reflect and reassess troublesome images hiding in plain sight. In vindicating the stories of Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Judith and Esther, it creates a ripple effect with what society tolerates in today's values. Museums are given the opportunity to shape society by looking into their own walls and reframing long standing transgressions, in an effort to paint better colors for the generations to follow.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study has provided valuable insights to curatorial strategies that has aided in uplighting narratives surrounding female biblical figures, there are still several limitations that have hindered this research from obtaining thorough findings. The sample size has only been limited to four institutions due to the lack of time to accumulate data. Additionally, several past exhibitions do not make their curatorial texts and labels digitally available causing issues in examining in depth. Moreover, this study primarily made use of Western institutions which causes a potential disparity with non-Western museums that may have contextualized these figures differently.

For future research, inclusion of more sampling units across various regions of the world would broaden the knowledge of this study. Additionally, exploring museums and curators that are not accustomed to handling religious iconography is a research aspect worth exploring. Will they find the same significance in correcting or reframing the narratives of these figures? Simultaneously, uncovering visitor reception and an analysis on audience impact would benefit this study, understanding what strategies have helped them gather more awareness, and identifying which topics still need to be raised in order to make these narratives more compelling.

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Appendix A

Figure	Artwork	Label	Curatorial Narrative	Theories Identified
1.1		Esther scroll by Salom Italia (1640) Jewish Museum, New York	Excerpt from curatorial text: "Making and Using Illustrated Esther Scrolls: The reading of the Esther scroll (Megillah) aloud in synagogue, by a designated reader, is one of the few ritual obligations of Purim and the central event of the holiday, taking place in the evening and on the following morning. Traditionally this kind of scroll is unadorned. As Jewish law requires, the text is handwritten in ink on parchment (animal skin) and sewn together with sinew. The scrolls were often backed with silk, curled around a roller, and placed in elaborate cases."	Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex
1.2		The Great Jewish Bride (Probably Esther) by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) Morgan Library and Museum, New York	"Seen here in two versions, or states, Rembrandt's print now known as The Great Jewish Bride is probably Esther. The earlier state looks half-finished, featuring a woman with long, unruly hair—likely modeled on Rembrandt's wife Saskia—in a shallow space. The final composition has much more detail. Esther now wears a rich velvet gown and fur cloak and is seated in front of a table piled with books and letters. Importantly, she also grips a scroll in her left hand: news about the decree to destroy the Jewish people. Rembrandt often focused his depictions of women on their inner life and character. Here Esther, fiercely determined, steels herself to fight for her people."	Semiotics Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex Feminism Theory

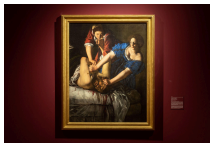
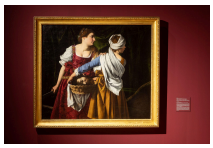
1.3		Esther by Aert de Gelder (1665) Private collection, London	"Here Esther appears in clothing fit for a queen, positioned in front of what is presumably Ahasuerus's throne. This painting seems to commemorate her marriage to Ahasuerus in the fashion of seventeenth-century Dutch portraiture. In her left hand, she holds a pair of elaborately embroidered gloves: her wedding gloves. These are a common feature in Dutch portraiture of the 1600s, used to memorialize the occasion of a woman's marriage. De Gelder was Rembrandt's last and most dedicated pupil. In this painting, Esther's luxurious robes were directly inspired by the clothing de Gelder would have seen on models in Rembrandt's studio. In Esther's story, she wore this kind of royal attire when she interceded with Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jewish people."	Feminism Theory
1.4		Esther Reading the Royal Decree by the Studio of Salomon Koninck (1609–1656) North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh	"In this scene Esther reads a letter—perhaps news of Ahasuerus's royal decree allowing the annihilation of all Jews in Persia. Similar to Rembrandt's important painting of the subject on view nearby, Esther here is shown in a moment of quiet contemplation. She is at her toilette—dressing and preparing to go before the king on behalf of her people. As in Rembrandt's painting, Esther is shown in a mix of theatrical costume and luxurious contemporary attire. The objects on the table—a pitcher, a basin, a box, and fabric—are inspired by those in Dutch homes. Common in images of Esther, this combination of a historical subject with trappings of everyday Dutch life helped viewers relate to the story and reinforced the queen's association with the Netherlands' ongoing fight for freedom	Feminism Theory Semiotics

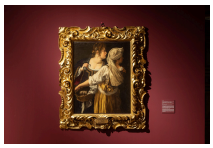
			from Spain."	
1.5		Esther before Ahasuerus by Frans Francken the Younger Flemish (1622) Collection of Salomon Lilian, Amsterdam	"This painting shows Esther before Ahasuerus in dramatic fashion. She has fallen to her knees so quickly that her veil billows out behind her, and she holds one hand to her heart and the other out to the king. She is desperately seeking his favor, as she could have been put to death for appearing before him uninvited. Ahasuerus, wearing an elaborate turban and positioned on a raised platform, signals his favor by stretching his scepter out toward her. The turbans and belted tunics worn by both Ahasuerus and Haman, at left, are fairly accurate Safavid Persian (1501–1722) clothing. However, the painting is more fantastical than documentary and includes several symbols of European royalty, such as the crown on top of Ahasuerus's turban."	Feminism Theory Misogyny Theory
1.7		The Toilette of Esther by Johannes van Noordt Dutch (1660) Private collection, courtesy of the Hoogsteder Museum Foundation, the Hague	"This painting captures the luxury of Esther's toilette, her process of getting ready to appear before Ahasuerus. Esther's royal robes—a yellow silk gown and red velvet cloak—are pictured here as contemporary Dutch clothing, slightly altered to give it more dramatic flair and a semi-antique appearance. Following Rembrandt's example, many Dutch artists	Semiotics

			depicted Esther's preparations as a moment of contemplation: she is steeling herself to intercede on behalf of her people and casting her eyes upward for divine assistance in her impending task. The objects on the table were typical in many seventeenthcentury Dutch homes: a mirror, a book, a tray, a box, linens, and—for particularly affluent households—a distinct and elaborate silver pitcher made by the Van Vianen family, a dynasty of Dutch silversmiths."	
1.8		Woman Reading a Book by a Window by Gabriel Metsu Dutch (1653–54) Leiden Collection, New York	"In this painting, a young woman in a luxurious red velvet gown and feathered beret sits at a writing desk. Though the room she occupies is from the 1600s, her clothing would have signaled to contemporary Dutch viewers that she was not of their time. She is likely an allegorical figure representing a concept such as reading or knowledge, in the way that Esther also came to represent the Netherlands. Scenes of reading and letter writing were popular in the Netherlands, which had a high literacy rate relative to other European countries, especially among women. Rembrandt and his contemporaries drew upon these familiar scenes in their paintings inspired by the Book of Esther, in an attempt to render the story more realistic for and relevant to their audiences."	Semiotics Feminism Theory

1.9		Queen Esther/Harriet Tubman by Fred Wilson American (1992) Jewish Museum, New York	"In 1992 the artist Fred Wilson, known for his interventions that challenge assumptions about history, culture, and race, gifted a work of art to the Jewish Museum on the occasion of its Purim Ball. The work is a two-layered, ink-on-acetate print that combines a sixteenth-century engraving of Queen Esther and an iconic photograph of Harriet Tubman, a Black woman who was born enslaved, escaped to freedom, and then returned to the Southern United States to free other Black people who were enslaved. This double portrait superimposes Tubman on Queen Esther, as if she were wearing a mask. The image posits the similarities between the two heroines, who risked their lives to save their persecuted peoples, and the enduring legends that surround them."	Feminism Theory
1.10		Portrait of Harriet Tubman by Harvey B. Lindsley (1895–1910) Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Prints and Photographs Division		

Appendix B

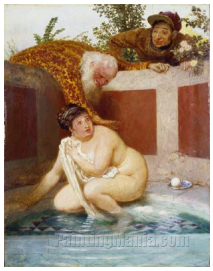
Figure	Artwork	Label	Curatorial Narrative	Theories Identified
2.1		Judith Beheading Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi (1612)	"A full-fledged icon of 17th century art, Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith enjoyed immense popularity. Artemisia shows us here that she has learnt Caravaggio's lesson possibly better than anyone else. The painter's personal experience of rape allows her to identify deeply with Judith as she plunges the sword into Holofernes' neck. Abra helping Judith in her task is a product of Artemisia's imagination not found in the Bible. The Assyrian general's blood flows onto the white sheets, underscoring the vision of a savage murder"	Semiotics Feminism
2.2		Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes by Orazio Gentileschi (1608-1609) The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo Norway	"Though given by a certain scholar to Artemisia, this picture was in fact painted by her father Orazio and shows the moment after Holofernes was slain. Judith and Abra are depicted while pausing on their flight from the Asyrian camp. Judith's reassuring gesture as the places her hand on her midservant's shoulder distinguishes the picture from Artemisia's Florentine painting but the women stay young in both versions, their clothing alone pointing to their different social standing"	
2.3		Judith Handling the Head of Holofernes to her Maidservant by Guido Cagnacci (1645) Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna Italy	"Judith is portrayed as though on stage on which the drama of Holofernes' killing is unfolding. The main deed is done and she now turns her gaze to heaven in prayer whilst the body of the general, whose head she grabs by the hair, can just be seen	Feminism Theory

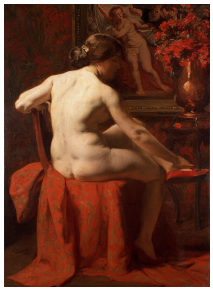
			behind her. Strong *chiaroscuro* and contrasting colours amplify the dramatic nature of a composition reminiscent of Artemisia's Gentileschi's interpretation of Caravaggio, which the artist must have seen in Rome."	
2.4		Judith with the Head of Holofernes by Cristofano Allori (1610-1612) Gallerie degli Uffizi, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Firenze Italy	"The artist is thought to have portrayed himself as Holofernes, his mistress Mezzafirra as Judith and her mother as Abra. The painting pivots on Judith's splendid gown, causing her to stand out against the dark backdrop, and reflects the influence of Caravaggio's work revisited in the light of Artemisia's art. One of its autograph versions originally hung as a companion piece to the David with the Head of Goliath in Carlo Davanzati's collection"	Feminism Theory
2.6		Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi (1615) Gallerie degli Uffizi, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Firenze Italy	"Artemisia was probably commissioned to paint this picture by the Medici during her time in Florence. Several scholars have seen a self-portrait of the artist in Judith's features. The picture is an original interpretation of her father Orazio Oslo's *Judith* also on display here. Artemisia succeeds in imbuing the scene with great dramatic tension and in more deeply penetrating the psychology of Judith and Abra, accomplices both in Holofernes' murder and in the fight to Bethulia.	Semiotics

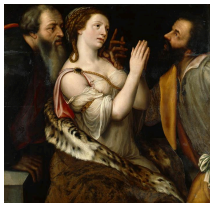
2.7		Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes by Orazio Gentileschi (1621-1624) Wadworth Atheneum Museum of Art CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, Hartford Connecticut	"Together with the Oslo picture, this is one of the interpretations of the subject produced by Orazio Gentileschi, who probably painted in Genoa. The moment he chooses to portray is a pause on the flight to Bethulia, interrupted by a sound that causes only the maidservant Abra to turn around. The two women carry the pannier together but the direction of their guns and their bodies sets them apart. They stand out against a dark backdrop, offering Orazio an opportunity to play with contrasting light effects that underscore the sense of fear and tension."	Semiotics

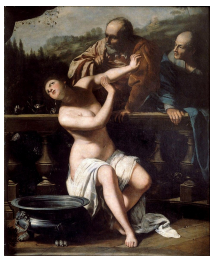
Appendix C

Figure	Artwork	Label	Curatorial Narrative	Theories Identified
3.1		Susanna and the elders by Joachim Wtewael (1611-1614) Museum Gouda, Gouda Netherlands	"Susanna has been a popular subject in art for centuries, even appearing in an ancient fresco in Roman catacombs. A strong pictorial tradition developed from the 15th century: a nude Susanna bathing and her two assailants in a lush garden near a palatial building. Century after century, artists painted this scene and added details that are not included in written sources, such as the fountain that Utrecht artist Joachim Wtewael also portrays Susanna bathing in, surrounded by beauty in this room. Wtewael depicts an elegant glass object. The elder's knee comes dangerously close to it, an allusion to Susanna's own vulnerability."	Semiotics
3.2		Susanna bathing bt Willi Geiger (1920) Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Foundation Corboud, Cologne	"This print is a shocking example of a racist and antisemitism portrayal of the characters in the Susanna story. It was made in 1920 by German artist Willi Geiger. Void of any beauty or elegance, we observe two brutes peeping at a woman in her least flattering pose. Like Hans Meid's work Geiger's was labelled 'Etartete Kunst' (Degenerate Art) by the Nazis. Yet the anti-Jewish sentiments in this problematic satirical portrayal are glaringly obvious."	Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex Misogyny Theory Madonna-Whore Complex
3.3		Susanna Bathing by Hans Meid (1912), Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Foundation Corboud, Cologne	"One's gaze is immediately drawn to Susanna who is in the centre of the scene. She lets out a desperate cry, not without reason, considering where the right-hand man's hands are. The two elders are overtly Jewish caricatures, with big noses and thick lips. Later, the Nazis would ban	Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex Semiotics

			German artist Hans Meid's works from museums. But his print shows how widespread antisemitism was in the first half of the 20th century."	
3.4		Susanna bathing by Arnold Böcklin (1888), Landesmuseum für Kunst & Kulturgeschichte, Oldenburg	"Antisemitism has a long history in art, as is evident in this painting by Arnold Böcklin. The elders are stereotypically depicted as two groping Jewish men. Even Susanna herself is a caricature of the dark voluptuous Jewish woman that would later become the subject of exploitation in Nazi propaganda. As early as 1891, the painting was shown at an exhibition in Berlin. According to one critic, it was a 'never-ending source of amusement for a cheerful laughing crowd' and was 'an antisemitic joke, painted with a priceless nonchalance'. Böcklin, who died in 1901, would become Adolf Hitler's favourite artist. This particular Susanna was acquired for the Führermuseum."	Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex
3.5		Figure 5. A series of works narrating the story of Susanna by Crispijn van de Passe, after Maerten de Vos (1574-1637)	"The moment when Susanna is assailed by the elders is the most popular with artists. But as this series by Crispijn van de Passe after Maerten de Vos shows, that is not the whole story. We see how Susanna is brought to justice and calls on her God. Young Daniel interrogates the elders and exposes them as liars, resulting in them being stone to death instead of her. She is reunited with her husband, to the joy of the people – 'Applausus populi est.'	Feminism Theory

3.6		Susanna and the elders by Agostino Carracci (1590-1595) Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam Netherlands	"A notorious example of this artistic appropriation of Susanna is an engraving by Agostino Carracci. The print is from his 'Lascivie', a series of 15 erotic prints banned by Pope Clement VIII, it portrays an anxious Susanna, but what is most striking is her overt nudity. One of the elders presses himself against her, while the other reaches for his genitals. This is one of the more explicit Susanna depictions."	Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex
3.7		Susanna and the elders by Rembrandt van Rijn (1650-1655) Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam Netherlands	"with just a few lines, Rembrandt manages to capture the poignant contrast between the powerful, sex-crazed men and Susanna's vulnerability. One of them stands unashamedly on her clothes, as if to emphasise her nakedness. The gestures of the elders and the way Susanna looks at them and tries to turn her body away tell the whole story and subtly portrays her emotions. As a viewer, you are drawn into the scene and sympathise with the shame and despair that overwhelm Susanna.	Semiotics Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex Feminism Theory
3.8		After the bath by Gustave Vanaise (1902) Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent Belgium	"The eroticisation of Susanna peaked from the 19th century onwards. Ghent artist Gustave Vanaise's work conforms to that pictorial tradition. There is no elder in sight, and yet this is not a random naked woman who has just stepped out of her bath. Vanaise has provided a clue by including a well-known painting of Susanna by Rubens in the background. The reference to Susanna is obvious. Does this perhaps transform us, the viewers, into voyeuristic old men?"	Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex Semiotics
3.9		Susanna and the Elders by Peter Paul Rubens (1607) Galleria Borghese, Rome Italy		

3.10		Scenes from the film Psycho by Alfred Hitchcock (1960) Universal Pictures	"In 1960, Hitchcock brought Susanna to the big screen as the ultimate sex symbol. In his famous horror film Psycho, he subtly but clearly alludes to the Susanna story. As a prelude to the well-known violent shower scene, protagonist Norman Bates peeks at his victim through a hole in the wall. The hole is hidden behind a painting – take a look at the film between the curtains. It is a painting of Susanna being attacked by two elders, by Willem van Mieris. Here you see a similar work by him that is just as menacing and violent as the scene in the film."	Semiotics Misogyny Theory Madonna-Whore Complex Male Gaze Theory Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex
3.11		Susanna and the elders by Willem van Mieris (1714) Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels Belgium		
3.12		Susanna and the future elders – Le Sourire, Parisian Art Deco Playboy (April issue 1922) Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Foundation Corboud, Cologne	"Two 'future elders' peep from behind a window and see what we do not. The double voyeurism, of the elders and of us as spectators, is characteristic of the Susanna visual tradition. Here the theme has been reinvented as a 1922 Parisian Art Deco *Playboy* centrefold. Susanna is openly portrayed as a seductive pin-up, smile and all, in a trivialising parody."	Male Gaze Theory Misogyny Semiotics
3.13		Susanna and the two elders, Michiel Coxie (1550-1559) Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe	"Susanna was an ideal role model for the Catholic church, especially in the 16th century, when religious strife arose in the Low Countries. The threat of the Protestant Reformation had to be resisted – just as Susanna had resisted. She drew strength for this from her trust in her God. the Mechelen court artist Michiel Coxie portrayed Susanna as a Catholic heroine whose faith remain unbowed despite her impossible situation"	Feminist Theory Madonna-Whore Complex

3.14		Susanna and the elders by Artemisia Gentileschi (1649) Moravian Gallery, Brno Czech Republic	“Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) was the most famous female artist of the 17th century. She painted Susanna no less than six times. This was highly unusual, as her female contemporaries did not depict the subject. It is almost impossible to separate these paintings from the knowledge that Gentileschi was raped by her teacher when she was 17. Moreover, during the subsequal trial she was tortured with thumbscrews to verify her story. Could this horrific experience have influenced her work, and especially her representations of Susanna? Or does this betray the tendency to biographically interpret women’s artistic qualities? Above all, Gentileschi was a highly successful artist, whose career spanned from Florence to London. While women artists usually limited themselves to portraits and still lifes, she applied her abundant talents to ambitious religious history paintings. In this monumental work, she shows Susanna as a flesh-and-blood human being, Gentileschi, inspired by Caravaggio, painted living models, and it shows. Blushing furiously she protects herself from her attackers. Contrary to most artists in this exhibition, Gentileschi chooses for the elder to not touch Susanna. The integrity of her body remains intact.”	Feminism Theory Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex Semiotics

Appendix D

Figure	Artwork	Label	Curatorial Narrative	Theories Identified
4.1		The Magdalen by Correggio (1518-1519) National Gallery London	Excerpt of the curatorial text: "Mary Magdalene leans on a large book and holds the pot of ointment with which she anointed Christ's feet. According to legend, she retreated into the wilderness of Provence and lived there alone, unreachable by man, and was brought bread by angels who sang to her. In penitence for her former life as a prostitute, she has abandoned all her jewels and finery and her hair is in disarray. She turns from her book to look at us, with one naked foot crossed over the other, and her breasts exposed."	Semiotics Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex
4.2		Saint Mary Magdalene by Guido Reni (1575-1642) National Gallery London	Excerpt of the curatorial text: "Saint Mary Magdalene is here depicted with eyes raised heavenward, a sign of her devotion and penance. The Gospels describe Mary of Magdala as one of Christ's followers, a witness to his burial and resurrection. Mary Magdalene was later identified with another biblical figure, an unnamed woman understood to be a repentant prostitute – an identification which is almost certainly untrue."	Semiotics Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex
4.3		Saint Mary Magdalene borne by Angels by Giulio Romano and Gianfrecesco Penni (1520-1) National Gallery London	Excerpt of the curatorial text: "Mary Magdalene, who according to medieval legend was a penitent prostitute, has risen from the dead on Judgement Day and is carried to heaven by angels, clothed only in her hair. This is one of the four lunettes (half moon-shaped) frescoes of the life of Mary Magdalene from the Massimi chapel in the church of SS. Trinità de' Monti, Rome."	Institutional Critique by Cultural Capital Curatorial Complex

4.4		Mary Magdalene by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo (1535-1540) National Gallery London	Excerpt of the curatorial text: "...The vase suggests that the figure is Mary Magdalene the penitent prostitute in her traditional red dress, who used a jar of perfumed oil to anoint Christ's feet."	Semiotics

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Questions for Madeline Hewitson

Re: Organizing Framing Religious Art in UK Collections

1. **Can you tell me more about your upcoming event, *Framing Religious Art in UK Collections*?** What made you interested to organize an event revolving around this topic, did you see any issues or concerns that made you feel this had to be talked about?

2. **Do you feel museums have a responsibility to reinterpret narratives when dealing with artworks rooted in gendered or patriarchal symbolism?**

3. **How do you think museums should navigate the balance between preserving historical works and presenting them through a contemporary lens—** cause I can imagine that it can be very conflicting to adhere to the artist's craft and the perception or the norms during those times as opposed to today's feminist movements and our society demanding for more cultural sensitivity -- how do you think museums can juggle that?

4. **Are there any guidelines or internal conversations in museums now about dealing with gendered or controversial biblical imagery?** Maybe more specifically in the curatorial narratives, are there any words that should be avoided in order to remain neutral?

5. Do you think museums are doing enough to contextualize or maybe vindicate these portrayals for modern audiences? **What curatorial strategies have you seen that were used to challenge traditional readings of these figures?** Are there any specific works or collections you've encountered where reinterpretation of female biblical figures has been particularly effective or striking?

6. A curator from Italy recently shared his insights with us as a class talking about the discoveries behind paintings of Esther – where it was discovered that she was a very prominent art subject Dutch 16th century because that was the time that Holland had just been liberated from Spain and artists painted Esther because she was a symbol of freedom so I really found that discovery so fascinating so I was wondering and it gave a greater meaning to what meets the eye so, **have you**

have encountered any similar discoveries of why these biblical women might have been painted and what they symbolized during those times?

7. **Lastly, what advice would you give to researchers like myself trying to unpack and interpret the curatorial approaches to these kinds of artworks in the context of modern ethics being socially conscious?** What's something I should focus on, or delve into?

Questions for Susanna Avery-Quash (Senior Research Curator of History of Collecting)
Re: Museum Practices and Permanent Collections of Mary Magdalene

1. **The National Gallery has an extensive collection of Mary Magdalene works, how does the museum approach the narrative around her, especially given her long history of sexualized depictions in art and contested history of her identity?**
    - Sub-question: Does the museum ever collaborate with religious scholars or feminist scholars for these kinds of artworks?

2. I've seen in a few of the curatorial narratives such as the work by Guido Reni that the museum has corrected a debated myth stating that she was "understood to be a repentant prostitute – an identification which is almost certainly untrue" **Do you feel museums have a responsibility to reinterpret or clarify narratives when dealing with artworks rooted in gendered or patriarchal symbolism?** And has the museum gone through – or is currently going through – any re-interpretations and rehangs because of this?
    - Sub-question: how often does a curatorial narrative get updated? What's the process like? Is it from a number of years, does it rise from a certain issue or complaint?

3. **How does the National Gallery navigate the balance between preserving historical works and presenting them through a contemporary lens—** cause I can imagine that it can be very conflicting to adhere to the artist's craft and the perception or the norms during those times as opposed to today's feminist movements and our society demanding for more cultural sensitivity -- how does the national gallery juggle that?

4. **How do you handle potential tension between historical accuracy and modern ethical standards?** Are there specific words you try to avoid in order to be neutral – I have seen the word

"whore" or "prostitute" which might be jarring to some readers when reading about a biblical figure but might have been an acceptable description in the past.

5. **Has there been an instance where the Gallery has adjusted due to feminist critiques of religious iconography?** Or maybe made it a reason for an exhibition or rehang?

6. **Are there any guidelines or internal conversations in museums now about dealing with gendered or controversial biblical imagery?**

7. **What do you think future curators should keep in mind when exhibiting biblical women—especially those with contentious iconographies like Susanna, Judith, or Magdalene?**

Questions for Undisclosed Interviewee
Re: Depictions of Mary Magdalene and Female Saints

1. **The National Gallery has an extensive collection of Mary Magdalene works, how does the museum approach the narrative around her, especially given her long history of sexualized depictions in art and contested history of her identity?**
    - Sub-question: Does the museum ever collaborate with religious scholars or feminist scholars for these kinds of artworks?

2. I've seen in a few of the curatorial narratives such as the work by Guido Reni that the museum has corrected a debated myth stating that she was "understood to be a repentant prostitute – an identification which is almost certainly untrue" **Do you feel museums have a responsibility to reinterpret or clarify narratives when dealing with artworks rooted in gendered or patriarchal symbolism?**

3. In 2017, the National Gallery had an exhibition for *Cagnacci's Repentant Magdalene,* considerably one of the most sensual depictions of Magdalene and one of the most sensual works for Cagnacci as well. A few years prior, in 2013, the BBC did a documentary named *The Mystery of Magdalene* – which featured the Gallery – that discussed the oversexualization of her image in

art. With this, **what were the curatorial challenges and considerations made by the museum in presenting such a depiction particularly within an institution that had recently been part of a narrative seeking to historically correct her identity?**

4. **How do you think museums should navigate the balance between preserving historical works and presenting them through a contemporary lens—** cause I can imagine that it can be very conflicting to adhere to the artist's craft and the perception or the norms during those times as opposed to today's feminist movements and our society demanding for more cultural sensitivity -- how do you think museums can juggle that?

5. **Are there any guidelines or internal conversations in museums now about dealing with gendered or controversial biblical imagery?** Maybe more specifically in the curatorial narratives, are there any words that should be avoided in order to remain neutral?

6. Do you think museums are doing enough to contextualize or maybe vindicate these portrayals for modern audiences? **What curatorial strategies have you seen that were used to challenge traditional readings of these figures?** Are there any specific works or collections you've encountered where reinterpretation of female biblical figures has been particularly effective or striking?

7. A curator from Italy recently shared his insights with us as a class talking about the discoveries behind paintings of Esther – where it was discovered that she was a very prominent art subject Dutch 16th century because that was the time that Holland had just been liberated from Spain and artists painted Esther because she was a symbol of freedom so I really found that discovery so fascinating so I was wondering and it gave a greater meaning to what meets the eye so, **have you have encountered any similar discoveries of why these biblical women might have been painted and what they symbolized during those times?**

8. **What do you think future curators should keep in mind when exhibiting biblical women—especially those with contentious iconographies like Susanna, Judith, or Magdalene?**

9. **Lastly, what advice would you give to researchers like myself trying to unpack and interpret the curatorial approaches to these kinds of artworks in the context of modern ethics being socially conscious?** What's something I should focus on, or delve into?

Appendix F

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH
FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:
Lexine Coronel, lexinecoronel@gmail.com / 745503lc@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION
You are invited to participate in a research study about the **contemporary reframing of traditional representations of female biblical figures in museums.** The purpose of the study is to understand how museums today interpret and present historical artworks of figures like Mary Magdalene, Judith, Susanna, and Esther and how these interpretations influence modern audiences' understanding of gender, religion, and art.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, in the case of an interview my questions will be related to gathering insights regarding museum practices and your curatorial expertise. Your responses are highly valuable to this research and will be carefully documented. I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS
I am aware that identifying participants in this study may involve certain risks. However, I assure you that any identifying details (such as first name, last name, occupation, etc.) will be presented with neutrality and written respectfully. I intend to use participants' names to attribute their insights where appropriate; however, if you prefer to remain anonymous, your preference will be fully respected and your name will not be included.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS
If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS
If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Adriana Turpin of IESA Arts and Culture Paris, adrianaturpin@gmail.com — anonymously, if you wish.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

I consent to my responses being used for the purposes of this study and I **allow** my identity to be disclosed:

Name Signature Date

I consent to my responses being used for the purposes of this study but I **do not allow** my identity to be disclosed:

Name Signature Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.