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Natalie Boymel Kampen


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The Muted Other

By Natalie Boymel Kampen

Classicizing art has often expressed political values, but its role in the service of gender ideology has rarely been explored. The goal of this essay is to develop a gender-based interpretation of several works of classicizing public art and to show how they communicated ideas about social order through their representation of female sexuality. The themes and styles taken from an ideal Greek or Roman past function in certain public reliefs of the late first century B.C. and history paintings of the late eighteenth century as a prescription for relationships between men and women. Their method, one among a number visible in these two periods, is to mute difference and alterity. Whether the cultural opposition is between male and female, public and private, or culture and nature, the muting of the Other implies power unequally divided, value unequally apportioned. In patriarchal cultures in the West, this means privileging the male insider and his values. Classicizing art can make this cultural model visible in a special way. Its stories and its idealizations may be used to give form to the conflict between oppositions and at the same time attempt to mediate that conflict in two ways: first, by demonstrating the moral and physical superiority of male Self over female Other; second, by convincing the Other that it is possible to become like Self.

The classical rhetoric of gender under consideration here establishes norms of moral behavior based on the authority of a better past in which roles and conduct were seen as clear and correct. Normative actions could be chosen by anyone, male or female; to make the correct moral choice was to become an insider, ennobled by the best of tradition. The golden age from which my late-first-century B.C. Roman and eighteenth-century European examples take their themes is pre-Imperial Rome, as it was an ideal time to the Roman authors of the late Republic and Empire, so it became for many in the eighteenth century. For both periods, early Rome meant a certain kind of virtue, based on a simple but rigorous and ordered society that contrasted both with barbarism and with decadence. In that ideal time, men were men and women were under their control. Thus, the classical rhetoric of gender in works of art is, like the choice of the period deemed classic, the staking out of an ideological position.

The frieze of the Basilica Aemilia in the Forum Romanum has a classicizing style that has permitted scholars to date it anywhere from about 60 B.C. to about A.D. 60. I believe, however, that its programmatic concerns require its dating to the same time as the Ara Pacis Augustae, that is, after 14 B.C., when Augustus helped the Aemillii restore the Basilica after a fire in the Forum damaged it. The frieze, which ran around the interior of the building, told the story of the foundation of Rome, a favorite theme in the time of Augustus—as the Ara Pacis, the Esquiline tomb paintings, and the work of Virgil and contemporary historians attest. In addition to locating the emperor in Rome's legendary history by presenting stories of his ancestors and his people, parts of the frieze gave specific expression to Augustus' ideas about the restoration of traditional family and morality. The two scenes that are most important for this discussion of gender ideology represent the Rape of the Sabine Women and the Punishment of Tarpeia, the only known monumental images of these central themes in Roman art.

The story of the Sabines (Fig. 1) helps to explain the role of female conduct in the revival of Augustus' ideal Roman family. Since the early Romans had no wives, they saw the rape of their neighbors' daughters as a necessity. The rape, in which two Romans carry off two Sabine women, gives form to the issues of exogamy and the social need for reproduction. The later intervention of the women between their Sabine fathers and their Roman husbands, implied and perhaps once part of the frieze but now untraceable, would have illustrated Rome's relationship to its Italian neighbors at the same time that it revealed the correct behavior of women in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers—symbols of social mediation.

The frieze contrasts the Sabine women, outsiders whose conduct makes them perfect insiders, with the insider, Tarpeia (Fig. 2), the Roman maiden who, bribed by their gold, opened the gates and let the Sabine warriors into Rome to avenge the rape. Tarpeia's seduction—turning her from insider to outsider—is punished by the Sabines, whom we see as they crush her beneath their shields. The Sabine women thus demonstrate the merits of correct female behavior and cease to be outsiders, whereas Tarpeia stands for the way unregulated female conduct, proof of alterity, can endanger the whole of society.

In both stories the classicizing form alerted the audience to the value of the program as cultural artifact and also to its authority, based on the styles, however eclectic, of the past. Like the frieze of the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, also ranged around the inside of a building, the figures are distributed without crowding in a single layer. The outstretched arms of the captive women,

Fig. 1 Rome, Basilica Aemilia, frieze, detail: Rape of the Sabine Women.
the idealized proportions of the bodies, the patterns of drapery all contribute to the evocation of the style of later fifth- and early-fourth-century sculpture well known among patrons and artists in Rome in the later first century B.C.

The frieze of the Basilica Aemilia expresses an ideologically motivated program within which gender functions both as immediate moral lesson and as metaphor for the normative relationship between Self and Other. The program is part of the Augustan reponse to the chaos of rapidly changing upper-class mores at the end of the Republic. Roman writers such as Cicero and Polybius repeatedly lament the decline of morality in the late republic, and condemn aristocratic women who care more about staying young and entertaining lovers than for bearing and nursing babies. In place of this perceived decadence, conservative thinkers offered an earlier age of correct conduct, of wives and daughters who, like Lucretia or Virginia, were silent, strong, and obedient, of husbands and fathers whose word was law. That era had a kind of enduring attraction to many Romans, and Augustus used it to construct his social program. The revival of the family, based in large part on the regulation of female sexuality, was to be accomplished by religious revival and by laws that controlled marital conduct and penalized the unmarried and the childless. Notoriously unsuccessful, the Augustan social program was nonetheless a serious and conservative attempt to stabilize society after the Civil War years and to establish a vigorous Roman population with a sense of its own historic responsibility.

Like the Basilica Aemilia friezes, the reliefs of the Ara Pacis Augustae, of 13-9 B.C., are to be seen against this background of perceived social instability and of Augustan attempts at moral and social renovatio (Fig. 3). As Diana Kleiner has most recently shown, the Ara Pacis is very much a family monument. Its program illustrates the consequences of Augustan peace in terms that encompass the fertility of the earth, the Romans, and the Imperial family itself (Fig. 4). The presence of the Imperial family not only demonstrates dynastic aspirations but also reminds the populace of its duty of responsible sexuality; the court is the ultimate model of this responsibility, which was framed in the Augustan marital laws and sanctions of the period. The panels rephrase the same themes in allegorical form, playing Roma, woman as moral state at peace, against Tellus, woman as nature at peace. Even the sow of Aeneas (Fig. 5) and the wolf of Romulus and Remus continue this theme of the tamed female in the service of the healthy state. The Ara Pacis program thus includes a consistent use of gender and combines female fertility with female morality. The whole is placed in a form that the educated viewer of the time, familiar with Greek statues and their history, could recognize as worthy of honor. Using restrained movement and emotion, compositions reminiscent of those on the Parthenon and earlier altars, and figure types with the proportions and monumentality of fifth-century Attic sculpture, the style is the signal of a moral past, which the content then explains.

The Ara Pacis and the Basilica Aemilia friezes incorporate the same kinds of gender messages into their programs, and they use similar techniques—muting the danger of the female outsider through demonstrations of normative conduct and through style as signal of the moral and worthy past. A comparable case exists in some of the history painting of the late eighteenth century, particularly in that type which Robert Rosenblum has called "neoclassic stoic." Again, classicizing public works of art may serve to demonstrate the idealized relationship between men and women in the interests of social ideology.

In both David’s Oath of the Horatii
Fig. 5 Rome, Ara Pacis Augustae, detail: Aeneas panel.

Fig. 6 Jacques-Louis David, Oath of the Horatii, 1784, oil on canvas, 130 x 167”. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

(Fig. 6) and Angelika Kauffmann’s Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi (Fig. 7) didactic Roman republican stories are combined with that classicizing style which the educated audience associated not just with archaeology but also with reform and morality.14 Different as their themes are, both pictures share a political vision of gender that depends on woman to be Other; in this vision, women start out as embodiments of emotionality and lack of control, cast as outsiders in relation to the public and valued world of men. Only through noble behavior—in other words, behavior based on patriarchal norms—can such alterity be overcome. And that, ultimately, is the message of this classicizing gender program.

The Oath of the Horatii offers a patriotic story in which women fail to conduct themselves properly, in the sense that they fail to live up to male codes of behavior; beneath the theme of the oath taken by the brothers to defend Rome lurks the fact that a brother will kill his own sister. She will die for mourning the fiancé whom her brother has killed as an enemy of Rome. Through the form chosen to represent the story, the contrast of weak, weeping, marginal women with muscular, architectonic, and central men, woman is shown to be Other and is thus devalued.15 Kauffmann’s Cornelia is, in contrast, able to overcome the alterity of her sex by her exemplary behavior.16 Standing between her sons—future virtuous men—and the two female figures toying with jewelry, she rejects the latter and points to the boys, saying, “These are my jewels.” Cornelia’s virtue resides, of course, in her explicit rejection of the trivial; but in Kauffmann’s picture with its simple forms and emotional restraint, the implicit choice is between men and women, moral self and problematic Other.

The late-eighteenth-century discussion of women’s roles and conduct was in part a reaction to the perceived license of upper-class women and the degeneracy of the family, and it offered a variety of plans for reform.17 Like the classical program, that of Rousseau was based on the idea of woman as Other, problematic and in need of regulation. What made the two points of view so different, of course, was that one saw the transforming possibilities of moral behavior, whereas the other sought to understand and make the most of nature’s laws. The Élan de la Nature of Marguerite Gérard (Fig. 8) and Benjamin West’s Agrrippina with the Ashes of Germanicus (Fig. 9) exemplify the two points of view. At the same time they demonstrate an essential difference between the women being discussed and perhaps being addressed. As one is an utterly domestic being, the other, no less mother and wife, is a heroic figure capable of

Fig. 7 Angelika Kauffmann, Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi, 1784-85, oil on canvas, 40 x 50”. Richmond, Virginia Museum.

Spring 1988 17
public action. It would appear that the classical gender ideology both in Augustan Rome and the eighteenth century spoke in terms that educated, powerful, and independent women could understand. Rather than asking such women simply to become domestic blissful creatures, this classical position permitted them to purify their own recent history of its irresponsibilities and false values and thus to become heroic—not mere women, but moral women. History and the classical style were the vehicles for communication of those messages to the women of the Augustan upper classes and the educated women of eighteenth-century Europe.

The classicizing imagery of gender is functional not only because it describes the socialization of women to moral conduct but also because it explains the relations between Self and Other, between insider and outsider, between ruler and ruled. The desire to control difference through the application of behavioral norms and the playing down of essence and nature in favor of conduct and civilization function to tame both women and imperialized peoples, to win them or to disarm them. Gender becomes a symbol and model for a larger world of idealized class and international relations.

Classicizing form is essential to this rhetoric of gender because it too mutes alterity. It not only sets norms for figures and compositions but removes emotional and physical eccentricity and abnormality. If woman is nature, the irrational, the abnormal—as Greek and Roman philosophers and doctors suggested—then classicism, as a style, subdues her. Woman becomes like man in the sense that her chaotic and irregular essence is controlled by her absorption into the civilized and rational world. Classicism is, thus, much more than a value-free matter of taste or visual ideals; it may become the instrument of a wide-ranging ideology, a device and a metaphor for social control.

Notes
1 My discussions with the Providence Women-and-Architecture Group and with Anne Weis and John Dunningan provided important ideas for this paper.

3 The dating runs from the earliest, 87–78 B.C., in Filippo Coarelli and Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, Etruria-Roma: L’Arte dell’Antichità classica, II, Turin, 1976, #49, to the latest, Neronian, in Erika Simon, in Wolfgang Helbig, Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer in Rom (4th ed. by Hermine Speier), II, Tübingen, 1966, #2062, p. 842. Most scholars date the monument to 34 B.C.; e.g., Gianfilippo Carrettoni, “Il Fregio figurato della Basilica Emilia,” Rivista del Istituto Nazionale d’Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte, n.s. 10, 19(61), pp. 5–78. Mario Torelli, in Coarelli and Bianchi Bandinelli, suggests that cuts on the backs of some of the blocks indicate their reuse from an earlier monument; the cuts can, however, be interpreted in a variety of other ways, e.g., from a later restoration. The reasons for a date contemporary with the Ara Pacis include textual references in Dio, 54.24.2-3, to reconstruction work on the Basilica, funded by Augustus and other friends of L. Aemilius Lepidus Paullus after.
the fire of 14 B.C. Donald Strong in *Roman Art*, Harmondsworth, 1976, pp. 78–79, used style and the Augustan popularity of representations of Roman foundation legends to suggest a date about 14. In addition, the date is appropriate in light of Augustus’ interest in Rome’s legendary history during the decade of the *Ludi Saeculares* of 17 B.C.

4 The Esquiline tomb connected with the Statilii is normally dated to the early Augustan period; see Bernhard Andree in Helbig (cited n. 3), III, #2489, p. 463.


6 For the story of Tarpeia and its meaning, see: Livy 1.1.x.6-9; and Ovid *Fasti* 1.261-2, where he calls her levis custos, fickle guardian. For custos applied to housewives in praise of their guardianship of the family and its property, see: T. E. V. Pearce, “The Role of the Wife as Custos in Ancient Rome,” *Erano*, 72 (1974), pp. 16–33. Note as well the use of levis, which also may be used for the arms of soldiers.

7 See especially: Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 13–16; Polybius 31.23–26; as well as Sallust 24–5; and Horace *Ode* 3.6. On women as uncontrollable: Livy 34.1–8, on the repeal of the Oppian Law.

8 For the topas of the good woman in this period, see especially: the Laudatio Muriiae, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VI.1.10230, and Laudatio Turiae, *CIL* VI.1.1527. On patriarchal power, see, for example: Valerius Maximus 6.3.9-12; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.25.4; or Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 10.23.


14 For the David, see: Thomas Crow, “The Oath of the Horatii in 1785,” *Art History*, 1:4 (December 1978), pp. 424–71; Norman Bryson, *Word and Image*, Cambridge, 1981, ch. 8, esp. p. 268, n. 36; and idem, *Tradition and Desire*, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 70–76. Stefan Germer and Hubertus Kohle in their discussion of the privatized psychology of the male protagonist (“From the Theatrical to the Aesthetic Hero: On the Privatization of the Idea of Virtue in David’s *Brutus* and *Sabinas*,” *Art History*, 9:2 [June 1986], pp. 168–84) point up the problem of uneven development in the thought of the period; at the same moment that the *Brutus* probes the private psychology of Brutus, the females are still isolated, restricted to the domestic side of the house, and presented as uncontrolled in their emotionality. The private is, thus, perceived with a mixture of yearning and disrespect, and the question of relationship between public and private remains unresolved but also, in its patriarchal character, fundamentally unchanged. For the relationship between devalued feminine and the private realm, see also: Yvonne Korshak, “*Paris and Helen* by Jacques Louis David: Choice and Judgment on the Eve of the French Revolution,” *Art Bulletin*, 69:1 (March 1987), pp. 102–16.


17 For the story of Cornelia, see: Valerius Maximus 4.4.4 pr.


**Natalie Boymel Kampen teaches art history and women’s studies at the University of Rhode Island. She has published on Roman sculpture and on the iconography of women’s occupations. She is currently preparing a book on historical relief sculpture in the Roman provinces.**

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