Gender Roles in 14th and 15th Century Italian Art

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ABSTRACT
This article is concerned with the way in which women and men were represented in 14th and 15th century Italian art. Due to the fact that the practice of the "works of mercy" is a central dogma of Christianity, poverty and illness, as well as the charitable acts responding to them, were generally a frequent subject of art at this time. Here, however, the emphasis is on pictorial programs of hospitals and brotherhoods. Conventions of representation tend to be transported and transformed over very long periods of time. They have the potential to unmask historical structures and also to actively contribute to processes of societal transformation. Hence, it is important that the visual self-representation of the Max Planck Society should reflect a gender-equal society.

The history of art as a discipline is concerned with describing, attributing, dating and interpreting works of art, with research into artistic creativity and its embedding in and impact on social and cultural developments, as well as with individual artists' personalities. The perspective of gender research or questions and interpretations resulting from the diversity of conditions for men and women—whether as artists, as patrons of the arts or as the subject of artworks—can be relevant in a variety of ways. Feminist art history has now become a field of research in its own right.[1] But even in research not explicitly committed to a feminist approach, gender-specific aspects should be taken into account when analyzing images. This applies with equal validity to the works of art of the Middle Ages and to the visual media of our time, whose pictorial language frequently draws on age-old conventions. The visual representation of the Max Planck Society is not exempt from this.

Using my own research interests as a point of departure, the following article offers a brief insight into the representational conventions of pictorial programs in the context of healthcare and charity for the poor in 14th

1 See, for example, *Burfoot* 2015; *Robinson* 2015; *Rose/Poe*, 2015.

and 15th century Italian art, focusing on the different representations of women and men.[2] No state health or welfare systems existed during this period, but instead a large number of charitable organizations, usually rooted in lay confraternities, but in some cases also in municipal or private initiatives, constructed buildings and furnished them with sculpted and painted artworks, altarpieces, illuminated manuscripts and liturgical objects. The pictorial programs could either refer to the institution itself or depict the theme of Christian charity in different ways.[3] Yet, poverty and illness and the charitable actions responding to them are also frequent subjects of Christian art in general, inasmuch as the "Works of Mercy" are enshrined in the Bible as indispensable for gaining entrance to paradise and are consequently a central dogma of Christianity. The Gospel of Matthew (25:34–46) lists six necessary "Works of Mercy": feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, offering shelter to strangers, attending to the sick, and visiting prisoners. In this context, Christ, as judge of the world, says the sentence which defines charity as a Christian duty: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me". Burying the dead, which is described in the Bible as an exemplary act, for instance in the Book of Tobit (1:17–20), was added as a seventh work of mercy in the Middle Ages.[4] Both male and female saints are therefore often portrayed as benefactors; for example, when healing the sick or distributing alms to the poor. Artists tended to transpose both allegorical and narrative depictions into their own time as far as location, architecture, clothing and material objects were concerned, so that it would be logical to examine such paintings with a view to gaining insights into the period in which they were created.

A difference can be observed in the representation of men and women in depictions of charitable acts, which allows for conclusions to be drawn about female and male roles in society. There are far more men than women portrayed in the role of the needy. Similarly, in contrast to a few wom-

2 This research is based on my work at the special research center SFB 600 "Fremdheit und Armut. Wandel von Inklusions- und Exklusionsformen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart" [Strangers and Poor People. Changing Patterns of Inclusion and Exclusion from Classical Antiquity to the Present Day Strangers amd Poor People. Changing Patterns of Inclusion and Exclusion from Classical Antiquity to the Present Day] at Trier University.

3 See, for example, *Helas/Wolf*, 2006; *Nichols* 2007; *Ritzerfeld*, 2007; *Armut. Perspektiven in Kunst und Gesellschaft*, *Uerlings/Trauth/Clemens*, 2011.

4 On the depictions of the Works of Mercy, see *van Bühren*, 1998 and *Botana*, 2011.

an, such as Saint Lucia,[5] or couples, such as Anna and Joachim, the parents of Mary[6], we encounter far more male protagonists in the role of benefactor. This is the case, for example, in a fresco painted around 1400 by Niccolò di Pietro Gerini in the Franciscan church in Prato, which shows "Saint Anthony Abbas distributing his inheritance to those in need".[7] Whereas many of the men show signs of illness and injury, the only woman in the painting is characterized as old, probably representing a poor widow.[8] The same theme was presented in a similar fashion at roughly the same time in Cascia.[9] There is only one woman among all the pilgrims, the rest of the figures are male and most of them are maimed. In this case, it is a mother with a baby in her arms, who can be identified as poor by her clothes and torn shoe. The fresco "St. Lawrence distributing the treasures of the Church to the poor", painted by Fra Angelico in the Cappella Niccolina in the Vatican Palace in Rome around 1440, allots more space to women, yet the role patterns are the same. While four of the five men are visibly maimed, crippled or blind, the women are once again portrayed as a young mother, a widow and a pilgrim.[10]

In each case we see scenes from the life of an early Christian saint which, in terms of clothing and decor, are transported to the world of around 1400–1450. Is it legitimate to draw conclusions about the reality of that time from the discrepancy in the representation of the sexes? We can assume that men were more likely to suffer physical injury at work or in battle, whereas women were generally dependent on a male provider, so that widows could fall into poverty rather easily. Men had a stronger presence in public life, whether in political or social functions or as workers, whereas the sphere of the home and household was the reserve of women. Only a few women stand out, such as Santa Francesca Romana (1384–1441), a married woman with children who cared for the poor and sick in

5 A panel by Jacobello del Fiore from a cycle illustrating her vita shows her together with an assistant and four crippled men as recipients. http://www.beniculturali.marche.it/Ricerca.aspx?ids=16481.

6 In a miniature contained in the Book of Hours by Giangaleazzo Visconti, which originated between 1388 and 1428, they distribute alms to 6 male paupers. *Bollati*, 2003, p. 260, ill. 138.

7 *Helas*, 2011, especially pp. 129–135, ill. 2–4.

8 On the modes of representation, see *Helas*, 2009, pp. 369–392; and *Helas*, 2013, pp. 51–105.

9 On the cycle of frescoes by an unknown artist (Maestro della Dormitio di Terni) in the apsis of the church of Sant'Antonio Abate, see *Gentilini/Chiari*, 2013, pp. 152–163, ill. 2.

10 For more on the cycle, see *Roettgen*, 1996, pp. 204–223, ill. 130.

Rome at the beginning of the 15th century and founded a female congregation of Oblate women. They settled in Tor de' Specchi at the foot of the Capitol, where a chapel housing a fresco cycle was dedicated to Francesca in 1468.[11] However, discrepancies between the pictorial representation and written sources of the time can also be observed in her person. While the testimonies for her canonization process prove that the vast majority of those she was able to help were women, the fresco cycle dedicated to her *vita* predominantly depicts her healing men.[12] The same applies to the people in the picture who are gathered before her as she lies in repose, hoping to be healed. Prominent on the right and left are men with various physical ailments—including the lame, the possessed and the blind—while the women are represented as two groups—the Oblate women on the left and young women with children on the right.[13] This self-representation in the fresco cycle of the Oblate, which deviates from reality, might be due to the fact that the women in this community had to assert themselves in a society marked by patriarchal structures, in which miracles witnessed by men could be considered more important. Thus, the prominent representation of the male witnesses of Francesca's miracles might have served to strengthen the position of women.

In this respect, a pictorial program does not necessarily allow conclusions to be drawn about facts, but rather about the interests and social structures behind such a commission.

The cycle of frescoes executed between 1440 and 1444 in the Pellegrinaio—a hall in the Sienese hospital of Santa Maria della Scala—includes a series of eight picture fields that depict the history and activities of what was the largest urban hospital of its time. We can assume that those running the hospital wanted to create the impression of a realistic situation here.[14] The effect is further intensified by the fact that the picture fields seem to open up in an illusionist manner, tending towards a central perspective, and thus appear to be a continuation of the real space. Nonetheless, these are not photographic snapshots but, as can be seen immediately from the sometimes fanciful architecture and the appearance of a number of distinguished contemporaries, they are constructed pictorial worlds that also convey their message by means of symbolic and allegorical elements.

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11 *Böse*, 2008, pp. 3–89.
12 *Böse*, 2008, pp. 66–68.
13 *Böse*, 2008, ill. 9.
14 *Roettgen,* 1996, pp. 186–203; *Scharf*, 2001, *Costa/Ponticelli*, 2004, pp. 110–147; *Helas* 2013, pp. 91–95.

Hospitals in the Middle Ages were not hospitals in the modern sense of the word, and whoever could, would have themselves cared for and treated at home. Instead, they often served several other functions. They were used to provide welfare for the poor, as an orphanage, as a home for the aged, as a hostel for pilgrims, and to care for the sick; however, their main purpose was to house foreigners or those too poor to be able to afford medical care at home, as was commonly the case for wealthier people. But equally important as, if not even more important than, caring for the needs of the body was caring for the salvation of souls and the Christian sacraments connected with it: baptism, confession, the Lord's Supper, anointing the sick and a Christian funeral rite.[15] The management of such hospitals was usually in the hands of confraternities, which in turn typically had a female arm, as sick or needy women and children were normally cared for by women. However, the history of the Sienese Hospital is told from a male perspective with regard to its foundation and management. It begins on the one side of the room with the legend of how a cobbler is led by a vision to start an initiative to save unwanted children with the support of the cathedral canons.[16] The following three images depict the construction of the building, the appointment of the first rector of the hospital confraternity and the granting of privileges by Celestine III.[17] The four picture fields on the opposite side show the hospital's activities. The first of these is dedicated to nursing and is perhaps the oldest detailed representation of a hospital room.[18] It shows exclusively male patients and male staff. On the left edge of the picture, a doctor with a urine glass in his hand is examining the urine sample, presumably from the patient lying on the stretcher at his feet. The center of the picture is occupied by a man with an injured leg. On the right, a man who is probably dying has his last confession taken, while the porters carrying the stretcher for his corpse are already approaching. Spiritual assistance was accorded as much importance as medical treatment. For this reason, the hospital brother washing the feet of the injured person is much more prominent than the surgeon who will then tend to the wound with the medical instrument and ointment he is holding in his hand. This is hardly a realistic situation because the wound would most probably have been treated first. The washing of feet is more a gesture of

15 For an overview, see *Mollat*, 1986; *Esposito*, 2005, pp. 15–28; and *Rhomberg*, 2015.
16 *Roettgen*, 1996, ill. 110. Similar legends have existed for several institutions, which should be seen in the context of the changed assessment of infanticide. See *Walter*, 2006, pp. 163–174.
17 *Roettgen* 1996, ill. 112–115.
18 *Roettgen* 1996, ill. 116–117.

humility imitating Christ who washed his disciples' feet, thus symbolically placing the hospital at the service of the sick. The second picture shows a scene where people are being fed and clothed, the narrative logic of which is not apparent at first glance.[19] A man in remarkably splendid clothing stands in the left of the picture with his entourage, welcomed by a man who lifts his black head covering in greeting. He is pointing to another man with the same black hood, who in turn is placing a robe over the back of a poor man who is naked except for his underpants. To the right of this man, in the foreground, we see a woman with two small children and a bread basket on her arm. However, the viewer's attention is also drawn to the people on either side of the woman. To her right is a crippled man who is moving himself forward on the floor by means of hand crutches, and on the left is a man with a blood-stained bandage on his leg. Onn the right side of the picture, a crowd of people can be seen through an open door, obviously waiting to be offered bread by a man who is also wearing a black head covering. In the foreground are women and children, and behind them is a pilgrim who can be identified by his hat with its pilgrim's sign. Knowing the hospital's practices, the picture can be read as a feeding of the poor. Siena was not the only place where it was customary to allow the poor to enter through one door into a room where they received alms, and to direct them out again through another door to ensure that no one could benefit more than once. In front of the second door we see a group exiting the room, including a woman carrying a child in a basket with a spoon on her hat—a sign that she is dependent on charity and eats where she is offered food. The picture is supposed to be read from right to left. The men in the plain black hats are members of the confraternity that ran the hospital. Only these men are visible; the servants and the female helpers, who would undoubtedly also have existed, cannot be seen. In contrast to the men, whose neediness is justified by illness or injury, the women, once again with children, are presented as physically appealing and unscathed. The eminent guest depicted in the left of the picture can be recognized as Emperor Sigismund, who actually visited Siena in 1432–33.[20] It remains debatable whether he actually attended such a feeding of the poor, but as early as 1414 he had already requested information from the Sienese government about the hospital whose fame had come to his ears.[21] On the one hand, his presence in the picture is a testimony to the significance of

19 *Roettgen* 1996, ill. 118.
20 *Scharf*, 2001, pp. 239–249, ill. 92–95.
21 *Scharf*, 2001, p. 240.

the hospital, and on the other hand he also assumes the function of an "inner spectator" with whom the viewer can identify. In the center of the picture, the act of clothing the man is intended to grab the viewer's attention, in which the painter demonstrates his ability to reproduce a naked body. At the same time, the hospital makes reference to the charitable work of dressing the naked, illustrating that it not only fed the poor but also clothed them, even though this would hardly ever have happened in this manner at the same moment. In Italian art, a woman is never found depicted naked or scantily dressed in this form in this type of pictorial theme.[22] This is where social norms and conventions come into play, which are also manifested in the actions themselves. For example, when Saint Margherita of Cortona gave away her own dress in order to offer it to a poor woman, she wrapped herself in a straw mat.[23]

Another picture field in Siena is dedicated to foundlings and thus to a theme in which women appear in two roles.[24] In their first role, they are represented as staff members, a larger number of whom are female in this case. In the center of the picture, a hospital brother is handing over a baby to a woman, assumedly a foundling or orphan, who has been delivered to the hospital. On the left-hand side of the picture, nurses are taking care of the smaller children, and a male teacher is teaching the older boys to read and write. In their second role, women are represented as the objects of charity in the right part of the picture, which shows the marriage of a girl with the help of a dowry provided by the hospital. The rector is holding a bag of money in his hand, which he is about to present to the groom. Girls who grew up in a hospital or foundling home had limited prospects in life —they stayed there and served the institution, they were placed in the service of a family, or they were married, with the hospital guaranteeing their origin and education, and providing the dowry. Education for girls frequently included singing, which is referred to in the depiction of the girls' choir at the pulpit.[25] Boys usually received training in the trades.

The issue of a dowry was a specifically female problem, and not only for foundlings. Without a dowry, it was almost impossible for a woman to

22 The representation of the naked female body is restricted to certain pictorial themes, such as Eve, Bathsheba in the bath, or as the damned in hell, as well as characters from ancient mythology or allegories, such as Luxuria.

23 *Helas*, 2013, pp. 66–67, ill. 7.

24 *Roettgen* 1996, ill. 119.

25 This is where the term conservatory as a school for singing and music has its origins. In Italy, the *conservatorio* was one of the names of orphanages, in the sense of a place where children were "preserved".

marry or even to join a convent. As the dowry amounts increased between the 14th and 15th centuries, poorer families or parents with many daughters often had problems raising the money.[26] This is why confraternities like the Buonomini di San Martino, the "good men" devoted to Saint Martin in Florence, assumed this task when the parents presented evidence of their need.[27] In the picture program of their small oratory, furnishing a girl with a dowry for her marriage thus effectively became an eighth work of mercy.[28] This work, together with their other depictions of the traditional works of mercy, demonstrate that the confraternity committed itself to a particular group of needy people, namely the ashamed poor. These were individuals or families who were not actually among the poorest and might even be aristocrats, but who were in need due to misfortune or illness and were in danger of losing their social status.[29] In 15th century Rome, Cardinal Torquemada established the confraternity of the Annunziata, or Madonna of the Annunciation, which provided girls from respectable local families with a dowry. The mission of the confraternity in this regard is illustrated in an altarpiece in Santa Maria sopra Minerva. It shows the Annunciation of Mary by the Archangel Gabriel, between whom the confraternity's founder is interposed. He is presenting three girls to the Madonna, who are receiving a purse (containing the dowry) from her.[30] This is also an indication of the cycle in which the system of charity was embedded: the benefactor provided for the salvation of his own soul, because every gift to a needy person is a gift to Christ himself and necessary for the passage into paradise. Another example is the Ospedale del Ceppo in Pistoia, which was decorated with a terracotta frieze above the entrance loggia by its director, Leonardo Buonafede, between 1525 and 1530. It represents him and the hospital confraternity carrying out the "Seven Works of Mercy". The "Clothing of the Naked" is represented as two different acts, handing out cloths and providing girls with a dowry.[31] Indeed, possessing a dowry was crucial to the life of a woman who had little other prospects than being a wife, running a household for her husband and bringing up children, so as not to look "naked" in a figu-

26 On this aspect, see *Esposito*, 1993, especially pp. 7–9, with literature on the issue of the dowry.
27 See *Sebregondi*, 2018.
28 *Sebregondi*, 2018, p. 85, Ill. 20; *Helas* 2013, pp. 97–98, ill. 21.
29 *Ritzerfeld*, 2007, pp. 113–140; *Helas* 2013; *Sebregondi*, 2018.
30 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoniazzo_Romano#/media/File:Annunciazione_Antoniazzo.jpg.
31 *Helas*, 2017, pp. 68–70, fig. 8.

rative sense. In this respect, it is a critical moment which impacts the rest of the girl's life.

The Buonomini in Florence did not run a hospital where they attended to sick people, but they did look after women who were in need of help due to the birth of a child. The biblical work of "Visiting the Sick" is portrayed in an unusual way to reflect this It shows three members of the confraternity inside the bedroom of a woman who is lying in childbed after the birth of her child, presenting her with the traditional gifts of a fat capon and wine, as well as confectionery and a swaddling cloth for the newborn baby.[32] Here the three men, as representatives of the confraternity, ostentatiously enter into a female domain, albeit fictionally, insofar as childbirth and postpartum took place with the help of midwives, nurses and maids.

The Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Rome, being the mother house of the Order of the Holy Spirit, which later operated hospitals throughout Europe, also offered help to women in two other special situations in life. As the illustrated book of statutes from the middle of the 14th century shows in the first part of the corresponding chapter, it admitted pregnant women for childbirth, a function that many hospitals did not fulfil.[33] A nurse breast-feeding a child is depicted in the same miniature, thus representing the hospital's function as a foundling home. Another illuminated initial depicts the admission of prostitutes over Easter, in order that they could live without sin during that time.[34]

Thus, there can be observed two gender-specific differences in the representation of men and women in the context of poverty and charity. The first is their outward appearance and the second is reflected in the roles in which they are portrayed. Needy men are often characterized by deformed bodies and sparse clothing. In addition to age, visible signs of illness and injury are an explanation for inability to work and justification for being dependent upon charity. Women's bodies are always covered and, at most, hunched over by age, but not maimed. Younger women are either depicted as virgins willing to marry or as mothers of infants, and they are usually portrayed in an appealing way. This mode of representing women arises from their social position and continues to inscribe a concept of femininity that is defined firstly by physical beauty and secondly by motherhood as a destiny. The women appear in three roles: the girl in need of a dowry,

32 *Sebregondi*, 2018, p. 91, ill. 34.
33 Archivio di Stato di Roma, Ms. 3193, fol. 127v; *Drossbach/Wolf*, 2015, plate XXX.
34 *Drossbach/Wolf*, 2015, plate XXXV.

the young mother, and the old woman or widow. Whereas the first situation, the dowry, is an issue specific to the 14th and 15th centuries and emerges as a pictorial theme only in the middle of the 15th century, the mother with children and the old woman are two themes with a long-standing tradition which not only have their roots in reality but contain, in addition, an allegorical meaning.

In 1423, Gentile da Fabriano created an altarpiece in Florence for the wealthy Strozzi family, one of whose predella panels depicts the "Presentation of Christ in the Temple".[35]. The biblical scene, which is set inside a Jewish temple, has been transported to contemporary Florence by the buildings in the background. The two ladies on the left, lavishly dressed in the style of the period, are probably members of the patron's family. On the other side of the temple, in front of a portico reminiscent of the architecture of Brunelleschi's foundling hospital, the construction of which had just begun, we see a man and a woman both begging for alms. They seem to have been taken straight from reality.[36] A glance at contemporary illuminated manuscripts, however, reveals that they are depicted in exactly the same way as the personifications of poverty and misfortune in the illustrations to Giovanni Boccaccio's work *On the Fates of Famous Men and Women*. The author tells the tale of how Poverty fights Fortune, wins the fight and sets the condition that Misfortune shall be tied to a stake and shall only be able to attach itself to the person who releases it by their own action.[37] In the illustration of a French manuscript from 1415, Misfortune is depicted in the shape of a man sitting on the ground with his legs crossed, while Poverty appears as an old woman with patched clothing.[38] Therefore, the public of the time would not only have seen two beggars on the predella, but could also understand that the figures represent Misfortune and Poverty. In other contexts, the personification of Poverty can also be found depicted as an old woman in shabby clothes—Giotto painted her as

35 The altarpiece today is housed in the Uffizi in Florence; the predella panel with the "Presentation of Christ" was brought to Paris as part of the art looted from Italy by Napoleon, and is now kept in the Musée du Louvre.

36 *Helas*, 2004, pp. 63–87.

37 *Boccaccio*, 1965, pp. 62–64.

38 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Des cas des nobles hommes et femmes*, miniature dated 1415 from the "Cité des Dames" workshop, Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 5193, f. 88r. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55009572g/f181.item.

the bride of Francis of Assisi in the early 14th century in the Lower Church of the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi.[39]

Similarly, the young mother with children also has an allegorical meaning. In the fresco of the feeding of the poor from the sala del pellegrino in Siena, she stands prominently in the foreground of the picture. She is holding a small naked boy on her arm who exposes one of her breasts, but not in order to reach for it as one would expect from an infant, but rather to present it to the viewer of the image. The allegory of Caritas, Christian love, has often been depicted in this manner.[40] Knowing this, the figure in the Sienese fresco takes on a different meaning. She is not only a needy woman with children, but she also embodies Christian charity and thus the hospital's charitable activities, reminding the viewer that the hospital's existence depends on the donations it receives. Her depiction therefore constitutes an appeal to donate something to the hospital, or at the latest to make an endowment to the hospital in the person's last will and testament, as was customary in the hope of salvation through charitable works. The Sienese painting thus transports typical gender roles—the prominent active persons are the male members of the confraternity, women appear only in the role of nurses, and the neediness of the three most clearly recognizable male supplicants is made apparent through nudity and injury. Women, in contrast, appear more in the background of the picture (except for Caritas) and as part of the group of people. Their role as mothers is defined by the children. However, the allegorical dimension of the woman with the children in the foreground of the picture with the distribution of bread opens up a field of discourse that owes its existence to embedding society into a patriarchal system.

This pattern is even more evident in the hospital in Pistoia, where the picture fields of the Works of Mercy are dominated by needy men and male members of the confraternity under their leader, whereas women are relegated to the allegorical realm as figures of the seven cardinal virtues in the spaces between the picture fields. Here again, the allegory of Caritas is

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39 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Franciscan_Allegories_in_the_Lower_Basilica_in_Assisi#/media/File:Giotto,_Lower_Church_Assisi,_Franciscan_Allegories-Poverty_01.jpg.

40 The three theological virtues are faith (fides), love (caritas) and hope (spes). They originate from 1 Corinthians 13:13: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." The traditional canon of the seven virtues dates back to Pope Gregory the Great (540–604). He had added the ancient Platonic cardinal virtues of prudence (*prudentia*), justice (*iustitia*), fortitude (*fortitudo*) and temperance (*temperantia*) to the three theological virtues.

depicted as a mother with children.[41] The larger female allegorical figures, however, stand between the picture fields as if without reference to the men shown performing various charitable activities, among whom the hospital's director, Buonafede, is portrayed in a clearly recognizable manner. This is a strategy that can be observed in public picture programs in many contexts.

An allegory is the pictorial representation of abstract facts in the form of a concrete figure or an object.[42] The majority of allegories are female. Best known is probably Justitia, the embodiment of justice with blindfolded eyes, sword and scales, illustrating that the law is administered without regard to the person (blindfold), after careful consideration of the facts (scales) and finally enforced with the necessary rigour (sword).[43] Visualizations of higher ideals through female allegories run through the entire history of European art.

The allegories of good and bad government in the Palazzo Pubblico, the town hall of Siena, were created by Ambrogio Lorenzetti between 1337 and 1339.[44] The "Good Government" is represented by six crowned female figures: Peace, Fortitude and Prudence on the left, Magnanimity, Temperance and Justice on the right. On the far left of the fresco the figure of Justice is repeated as she is balancing the scales held by Wisdom. A long procession of men, much smaller in size, extends along the lower edge of the picture—they are representatives of the Sienese city government, not in the form of portraits, but as actual commemorated historical figures. The picture employs the hierarchical perspective; that is, the size of a figure corresponds to its importance. However, this refers to an internal system within the picture, the visualization of the values on which the urban community is built, and not to the real role of women in Sienese society. Government was exclusively in the hands of men.

This practice of placing women in an allegorical dimension is not a phenomenon restricted just to the Middle Ages; rather, it witnessed a new bloom in the 19th century, the traces of which are still omnipresent today —in visual culture as well as in language and writing.[45] The Max Planck Society is a prominent example of this phenomenon, because of the logo which represents the institution: a helmeted female head in profile. It is

41 *Helas,* 2017, ill. 28.
42 *Pfisterer*, 2011, pp. 14–19, s.v. Allegorie, Personifikation.
43 *Althans*, 2002.
44 See, for example, *Seidel*, 1999, as well as *Wolf*, 2013. However, his subject is explicitly not a "woman", but the interpretation of the female allegory of *Pax/Securitas*.
45 *Warner*, 1985; *Gall*, 1999; and *Wenk*, 1996.

Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, tactical warfare, art and shipbuilding, as well as guardian of knowledge, her Greek counterpart being Athena.[46] Two references to this topic can be found on the Max Planck Society's websites. Under the entry on the founding of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society (the processor to the Max Planck Society) on 11 January 1911, it is mentioned that Minerva was chosen as the emblem: "The Roman goddess of science embodies wisdom, bravery and perseverance".[47] In the description of its history we learn: "However, the new membership badge, on which Minerva replaces the portrait of the Kaiser—the original emblem of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society—was not introduced until December 1926."[48] With the end of the Empire and the consequent loss of the organization's patron, the image of Minerva thus gained even greater prominence. Minerva is an ancient goddess; that is not an allegory in a strict sense, but she acts as such because she embodies wisdom and hence embodies the claim of this science organization to acquire and utilize knowledge through basic research. However, just like in Siena in the 14th century, this does not imply that women are actually accorded their share or allowed participation in this production of knowledge.

But why use female allegories? The most common explanation for the femininity of allegory is its feminine grammatical gender in Latin as the origin of the European intellectual history.[49] However, even language is contingent upon the presumed social position of women in society, and thus an interaction between grammar and patriarchal order must be assumed. Various authors have attempted to explain the female gender in allegories. Cesare Ripa, the author of a 16th century standard work on the subject of allegories, wrote about "fortezza" (strength): "She ought to be a lady, which is not to claim that a strong man should emulate feminine ways, but to adapt her figure to the way we speak; or because, every virtue is a manifestation of that which is true, beautiful and desirable, in which the spirit takes delight, and as we generally ascribe beauty to ladies, we may well represent one through the other [...]."[50] Thus, it is from a male view and a male order in which depictions of allegories function. Over the course of feminist movements, the issue of the femininity of allegory and the discrepancy between the representation and the portrayed was dis-

46 On the popularity of Athena/Minerva in the 19th century, see *Warner*, 1989, especially pp. 181–184.
47 https://www.mpg.de/945416/5_event2-1911.
48 *Renn/Kant/Kolboske*, 2015.
49 *Warner,* 1989, especially pp. 100–106; *Gall* 1999, p. 105.
50 *Ripa*, 1602, pp. 90–93, quoted in *Warner*, 1989, p. 102.

cussed. Caecilie Rentmeister dealt with this question in 1976 and demonstrated that female allegories had a long tradition especially in societies in which women had a subordinate position and that they performed an "appeasing function" in patriarchy.[51] As per Bornemann, she interprets allegories as "figures adopted from the mother right" and as a "justification for the oppression of women".[52] According to her analysis, the very fact that female allegories and the principles they represent are revered in a male-dominated society means that real women can be suppressed by being disregarded. Thus, the figure of the allegory reveals the general dynamics of the pictorial representation of the feminine. Though female figures are also present in art and literature from antiquity to the 20th century as historical personalities, they are mostly depicted as mythological and allegorical figures. The abstract concepts and ideas they embody stand in marked contradiction to their real position in society; such figures represented areas that were not accessible to women in reality. "The female allegories represent the opposite of the female, they do not represent women, but instead the governing principles of society, which even the "great men" were lacking and which transcended them."[53] The actual female body is thus deprived of its materiality and individuality and becomes the semiotic embodiment of that which it represents. "Only by not referring to a real woman the represented woman become a signifier for something else".[54]

When the Kaiser Wilhelm Society chose Minerva as its emblem, it was in keeping with one of the trends of the 19th and early 20th centuries, in which a proliferation of female personifications could be observed, whereas actual women were largely absent from the sphere of public life and—apart from a few exceptions—participated neither in political nor scientific processes.[55] After the Second World War, the head of Minerva was adopted by the Max Planck Society, which sought to retain the formal and symbolic language of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society. Images are not neutral, let alone an unbiased representation of reality, whether it be the frescoes of the Renaissance, the logo of the Max Planck Society, or the photographs which the organization uses in representing itself. Either intentionally or

51 *Rentmeister*, 1976, pp. 92–112.
52 *Rentmeister*, 1976, p. 94. *Bornemann*, 1975, p. 367.
53 "Die weiblichen Allegorien repräsentieren das Gegenteil des Weiblichen, sie repräsentieren nicht die Frauen, sondern das Herrschende, das selbst den ‚großen Männern' mangelt und über sie hinausweist". *Wenk,* 1996, p. 191.
54 "Erst dadurch, dass die dargestellte Frau nicht auf eine reale Frau referiert, kann sie zum Zeichen für anderes warden" *Weigel*, 1990, p. 167.
55 *von Aretin*, 2010, especially pp. 26–27.

unintentionally, they postulate and confirm social and gender-specific discourses. In 2018, the Max Planck Society's homepage prominently featured the announcement of the Lise Meitner Program alongside a call for nominations for Max Planck Directors, phrased only in the male form[56] (Fig. 1). Whereas the women in the picture present themselves as "chaste" and buttoned up, the man poses with open lab coat and in "attack position".[57] With a slight exaggeration, one could interpret the two women, who are partly retreating, as potential prey for the man. Is this really an image that would encourage women to apply? The call for nominations, on the other hand, is illustrated with a blurred picture, because this would probably reveal what the reality looks like: a male-dominated Commission that decides over posts for male directors and not female directors (as implied by the use of the masculine form of the word in German).

Images emerge from the interplay between different aspects and interests—falling back on a repository of narratives and symbols of European culture, political or religious messages, social conditions, artistic and aesthetic discourses and, last but not least, of gender roles, which are often determined by the fact that artists and clients were, and still are, mostly male. In Siena in 1441, what we are dealing with is quite openly and unambiguously the self-representation of a male assembly in a patriarchal world. The role of women in society is strictly defined not only by depicting them in their actual conditions, but also by means of allegorization, which assigns them a place outside of social reality, without any possibility of active participation. The visual language of our times works in more subtle ways, and the Max Planck Society has been striving for a more gender-fair self-portrayal for years. Nevertheless—leaving aside the Minerva—mechanisms are still discernible that have the opposite effect or unmask the actual state of affairs.

This contribution has been translated by Frank Hafemann.

56 https://www.mpg.de/11739724/broschuere-chancengerechtigkeit.pdf (accessed on 09 Apr 2018).

57 *Baier*, 2016, p. 30 recommends men to "frame" the genitals with their thumbs as a gesture of dominance.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Screenshot of News on Max Planck Society Website. (2018). https://www.mpg.de/de.

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